



This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

Usage guidelines

Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

We also ask that you:

- + *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.
- + *Refrain from automated querying* Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.
- + *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.
- + *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

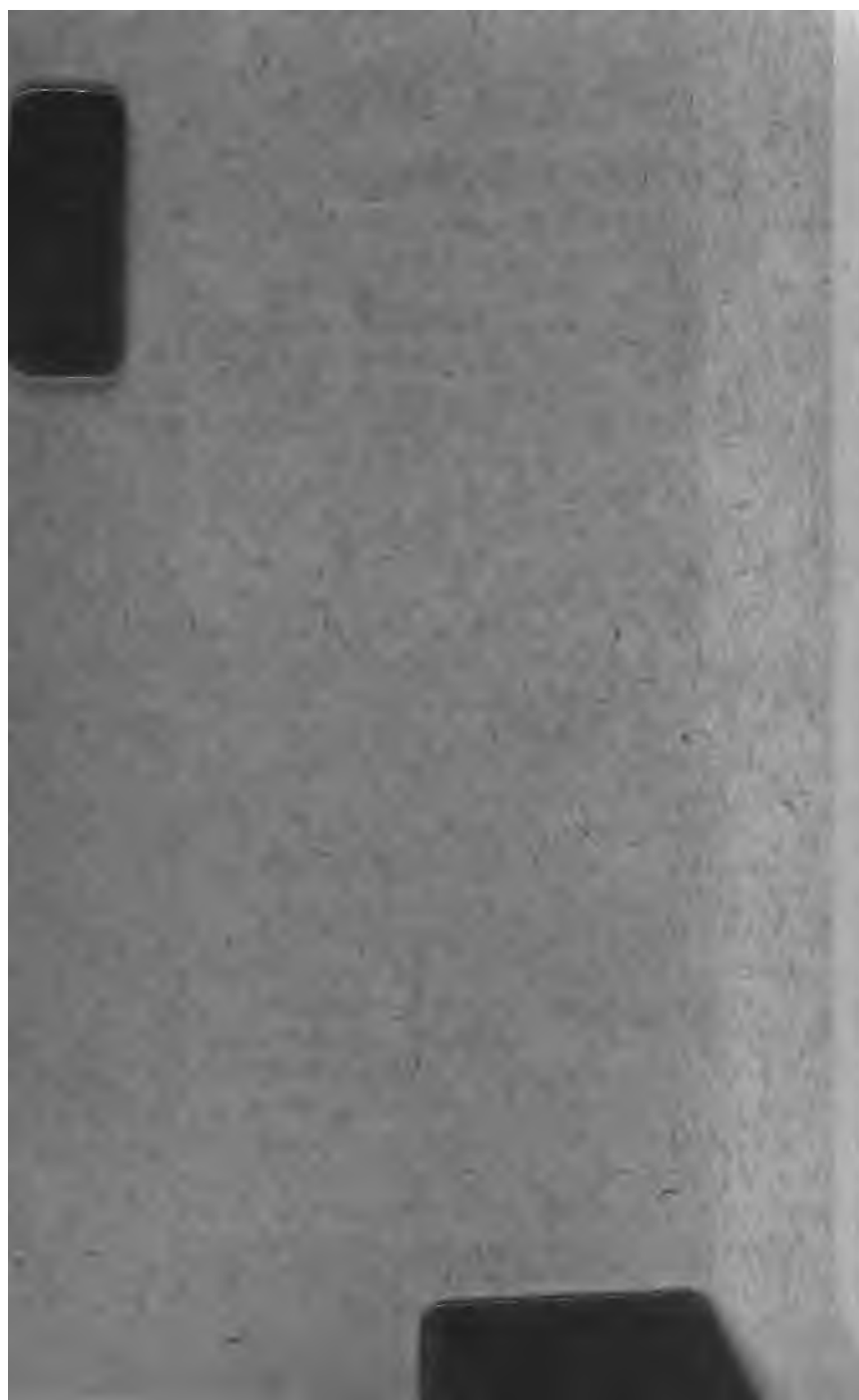
About Google Book Search

Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at <http://books.google.com/>

NYPL RESEARCH LIBRARIES



3 3433 07602976 2











THE BRAVE BEAST LABORED WITH EYES STARTING FROM
THEIR SOCKETS

✓ 1000 in 1000
7-26/27 R
DONATED BY THE
MERCANTILE LIBRARY ASSOCIATION
NEW YORK CITY

THE JONAH OF LUCKY VALLEY

AND OTHER STORIES

MERCANTILE LIBRARY,

NEW YORK.

BY

HOWARD SEELY

AUTHOR OF

"A NYMPH OF THE WEST" "A RANCHMAN'S STORIES" ETC.

ILLUSTRATED

M 311429

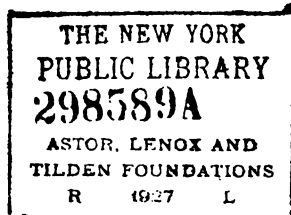


NEW YORK

HARPER & BROTHERS, FRANKLIN SQUARE

1892

Chas



Copyright, 1892, by HAKPER & BROTHERS.

NEW YORK
JAN
1908

All rights reserved.

TO
MY FRIEND
HERBERT D. LACEY



PREFACE

THE stories included in the present volume are collected from various sources. "The Jonah of Lucky Valley" and "A Daphne of the Foot-Hills" appeared in HARPER'S WEEKLY; "A Romance of the Big Horn" and "The Sheriff of Oskaloos" in *Peterson's Magazine*; "Yaller-Bird" and "Yaller-Bird's Christmas Turkey" in *Texas Siftings*.

HOWARD SEELY.

CONTENTS

	PAGE
THE JONAH OF LUCKY VALLEY	3
A ROMANCE OF THE BIG HORN	97
A DAPHNE OF THE FOOT-HILLS	141
THE SHERIFF OF OSKALOO	171
"YALLER-BIRD"	199
YALLER-BIRD'S CHRISTMAS TURKEY	223

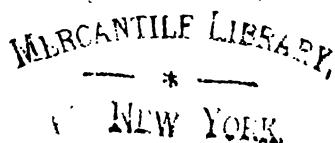


ILLUSTRATIONS

	PAGE
THE BRAVE BEAST LABORED WITH EYES STARTING FROM THEIR SOCKETS	<i>Frontispiece</i>
PARSON BLACKFOOT	4
THE SHERIFF RAISED THE WEAPON SLOWLY IN HIS LEFT HAND	17
“WHAT DO YOU CALL BEIN’ ‘ONCOMMON SWEET?’”	29
“I LOOKS TOWARD YOU, PARDNER”	33
THAT UNCOUTH PHILOSOPHER SHAMBLED FORWARD .	49
THE FLYING FIGURE PASSED	61
“CHOOSE WHICHEVER ONE OF THESE BARKERS YOU WANT”	69
“I SETTLE MY OWN SCORES”	71
“DURN ME IF I DON’T GO HIM DOUBLE OR QUILTS!”	76
AN AMERICAN FREEDOM OF CARRIAGE	85
“AN UNEXPECTED PLEASURE”	87
“MEBBE YOU’D LIKE NOW TO GAMBLE ON MY OWN MATRIMONIAL PROSPECTS?”	91

THE JONAH OF LUCKY VALLEY





THE JONAH OF LUCKY VALLEY

I

THEY called him "Jonah." Even before he burned down his ranch in 1880, in an ambitious attempt to fertilize his broad acres by a system of prairie fires, he had acquired this baleful title. As he lost his wife as well as his home by this last catastrophe, it would seem that his cup of misery was full. Such, indeed, was the current opinion among the stockmen of Lucky Valley. A few who had the honor of Mrs. Durgy's acquaintance were known to express scepticism. But be that as it may, the name of the unfortunate ranchman had by this time become so synonymous with misfortune that although Parson Blackfoot made his trials the theme of a stirring sermon, and exhorted him to renewed hope on the ground that "whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth," it was noticeable that the worthy divine did not thereby increase public confidence in his future fortunes. Neither did this glowing discourse improve his prospects as an eligible widower among the fair sex of Tom Greene County. In spite of such potent recommen-

dations as agreeable manners, a fine figure, and a handsome face, it was generally agreed among the feminine portion of Lucky Valley that to marry William



PARSON BLACKFOOT

Durgy would be simply to tempt fate. This conviction was the outcome of a long train of personal disasters. It began 'way back in '71, when he told his partners one morning that he had compounded a new "sheep dip" that was prompt and efficient against the ravages of scab.

"No need of hot water, tobacco strippings, nor nothin'," he explained in his enthusiasm. "Ye jest fill your vat, put in the drug, chuck in your sheep, and the jig is over."

It proved so. Within twenty-four hours after the first experiment they lost 2000 fine ewes and wethers, and the firm went into voluntary bankruptcy. The chagrin with which this accident filled his partners is said to have inspired his unfortunate christening. It clung to him ever after.

Then Durgy abandoned sheep-farming and went into the saloon business. At the outset he seemed successful. He had the best billiard-table in the county, his bar was well patronized, and he was an agreeable and popular proprietor. But his evil genius pursued him in his new vocation. One day he mistook some strychnine, which he had used for killing wolves, for the powdered sugar he employed in the preparation of a cocktail for which he was famous. The blunder had a disastrous effect upon his patronage. For the second time the ill-starred individual availed himself of the bankrupt act, and the hostelry, which had acquired fame and popularity as a public-house, became the property of an enterprising undertaker.

And so misfortune pursued him. He borrowed capital and set up a "faro game" at Oskaloo, which at first won largely, but was ruined by a famous plunger who was monotonously fortunate in "coppering the jack." A fast mare he bought at a very low figure broke her leg in her first race, and destroyed the flattering prospects which the turf seemed to offer. Some cattle he owned as a side venture drifted during a cold "Norther" the same winter, and were frozen to death on the Llano Estacado. Shipwrecked in health and fortune—in all but the flow of animal spirits, which seemed to survive his every calamity—he wandered aimlessly about from one point to another, until one summer's day he stranded helplessly in Lucky Valley. He had been attracted thither by the prevailing prosperity which seemed to favor

its inhabitants. An easy affability of manner, to which I have before alluded, speedily won favor with the stockmen. In the garrulous confidences of the bar-room they listened to the story of his woes and wanderings. In this way they came to regard him as a man of push and energy who had fallen upon evil days.

One memorable evening, when the convivialities at the Round-up Saloon had been unusually hearty and harmonious, some local philanthropist, roused by Durgy's eloquent recital of his troubles, mounted a bench and suggested that contributions were in order to mend his broken fortunes. "What we want to do is to set Bill on his feet agin and give the boy a show," was the spokesman's terse way of putting it. The proposition, though a novel one in a frontier community, met with singular success. A hat was passed around immediately, and whether owing to the mellow condition of the donors or the personal popularity of Bill, it was returned to him half full of greenbacks and silver. Certain individuals whose wealth was better represented by live-stock than currency promised to assist him in starting a ranch by generous contributions from their own herds. The real-estate agent of the county was importuned in Bill's behalf by influential parties, and induced to offer him a fine and well-watered range, to be settled for on a very indulgent system of partial payments. Thus it came to pass that, through the kind co-operation of his neighbors, Durgy found himself once more embarked upon a sea of apparent prosperity. He

pursued his new enterprise with the enthusiasm of his sanguine temperament. But that same evil star which hung over his past was apparently too potent for even the favorable atmosphere of Lucky Valley. As soon as Durgy began to put certain theories of his own into operation, they recoiled upon their projector with ruin and disaster. When his ranch burned down in the prairie fire that he himself had started, he was evidently disheartened. The loss of his wife he bewailed in eloquent terms.

"You see, I'd got kinder used to Marier," he explained to a friend who was well aware of the late Mrs. Durgy's temper and eccentricities, "and I miss her jest ez much ez I do the house and the rest of the furniture. Marier was a little inclined to heave things, and used to round me up occasionally, but all the same I feel right lonesome now thet I'm travelin', so to speak, on a lone trail."

The sympathy of his auditor was apparently beyond words.

II

It had been raining intermittently for several weeks in Lucky Valley, and the face of nature showed everywhere the effects of so much moisture. Although it was in the fall, the encircling hills were green with verdure, and the black line which marked the recent prairie fire was fast disappearing before the upspringing grasses that flourished above the burned area.

As the unfortunate ranchman rode over the undulating prairie billows, he noted with a melancholy satisfaction this renewed fertility.

"Jest as I reckoned," he muttered; "and now the ranch is gone when things is lookin' up."

A gray, forbidding sky hung above him, and in the air were the cries of various wild-fowl winging their way in the direction of the river. Mounted upon Lone Star, a powerful chestnut horse, of which he was justly proud, William Durgy felt a momentary sense of superiority to his misfortunes. With the strong horse beneath him, that feeling of power which every good rider knows seemed to stir within him.

"Game's plenty to-day," he said to himself, with a sweeping glance over the outlying prairie. "P'r'aps if I rode over to Wild Cat River I might get something. I've only my rifle, I know," glancing down at the Winchester in its leathern case attached to the saddle, "but I might get a crack at a flock of geese. I reckon I'll try it."

He touched his horse with the spur and dashed away.

Lone Star was feeling good that morning, and seemed to enjoy the gallop as much as his master. They were already half-way to the river, when the rider's eye was attracted to a piece of writing-paper fluttering in a thorny shrub. Such an object is so rare a sight on the prairie that Durgy at once reined up and disentangled it from the sticks and grass in which it had lodged. It proved to be a note that had

been folded and was now lying half open. Durgy glanced over it. It was written in a feminine hand:

“DEAR JIM,—I got the bracelet all right, and on my arm it looks too lovely! I’m coming across again Wednesday, if I can. I’ll meet you at the old place. Take care of yourself, and keep out of mischief. Father’s suspicious. Excuse this note. My ink’s out, so I had to write with shoe-polish. Lou.”

A smile of amusement gathered on Durgy’s face as he read this unusual missive. It was evidently some appointment for a clandestine meeting. He had stumbled upon evidence of some secret romance. With pardonable curiosity he ran over in his mind the names of the ladies of his acquaintance in the neighborhood. There was none that corresponded with the one attached to the note. A sudden inspiration came to him.

“I wonder if thet ain’t Sheriff Townsend’s daughter?” he soliloquized. “I hear he’s got an uncommon fine girl, but I never yet got to see her, she’s been away visitin’ so much. The old man’s been so crippled up since thet fellow filled his right arm full of buckshot thet it’s likely he can’t look after his fam’ly. Now I think of it, his daughter was away from home the time he got shot. I should think thet the man who got this note would be a little more careful of such favors. Mebbe he had it inside his hat and it blew away.”

So thinking, Durgy rode on.

"I wouldn't wonder if it might be rather risky at the crossing to-day," he muttered, as he thought of the recent rise in the water holes and creeks. "Strikes me I wouldn't want any child of mine fordin' the Wild Cat such a day as this."

With these meditations passing through his mind, he drew near the line of trees that bordered the water-course. Arrived at the crossing, he found the current rushing with unusual force over the stones and rocks that marked the ford. Below the shallows the water dimpled and eddied in the sullen depths, and hurried its swollen tide through the recesses of a rocky glen. A brisk wind that was blowing was tossing spray and foam about, and the noise of the gale and the rush of the river increased the general sense of insecurity. A perilous day certainly to attempt a crossing. Durgy was thinking of this as he rode Lone Star knee-deep into the stream and permitted him to drink.

Sitting in the saddle, with the bridle thrown loosely over his horse's neck, he saw a young girl ride suddenly down the sloping bank of the farther shore. She was mounted upon a small sorrel pony, and without hesitation plunged into the stream, guiding the animal with singular courage over the slippery stones. In his surprise Durgy was stricken mute with a feeling of admiration for the daring rider. But as he noted the unusual depth of the water her progress denoted, he raised his voice in a cry of warning. Apparently this was not heard by the girl, between the noise of the gale and her preoccupation in guiding the footsteps of her horse. Immediately after, Lone

Star raised his head, and seeing the mustang, now half-way across the stream, uttered a shrill neigh of welcome. The unexpected sound caused both rider and horse to look up, and in the act of stepping from one stone to another in the swift water, the latter missed his footing. A series of stumbles, ending with a plunge into deeper water, followed, and in his efforts to regain his foothold the horse rolled half over with a mighty splash. He emerged immediately after, but with an empty saddle, and turning about in mid-stream, started in a panic for the opposite shore, which he rapidly gained.

Seated in his saddle, William Durgy witnessed this sudden accident with an alarm that sent a chill through his pulses. A second later he saw the young girl rise to the surface and make an effort to sustain herself on the swiftly flowing current. She appeared to have some knowledge of swimming, but hardly had she risen when, striking his spurs deep into his horse, Durgy was himself struggling with the river. A few plunges and he felt the noble animal swimming under him, Lone Star's grand muscles keeping him well up as he sat in the saddle. Aiding his horse as much as possible, he was in a few seconds by the side of the struggling girl, and he cast an arm about her in the midst of the flood. Raising her with all his strength, he enabled her to gain a foothold between his heavy boot and stirrup leather, while she clung with the tenacity of fear to the pommel of his saddle. Then turning his horse about in the stream, he made every exertion to reach the opposite bank. Encumbered as

he was by the additional weight of the girl and the lack of balance, it was a severe struggle, but the exceptional strength of his horse stood him in good stead. The brave beast labored with eyes starting from their sockets, and once, as he fought his way into shallow water, he fell upon his knees. But, assisted by a strong rein on the bridle, he struggled to his feet, and, panting and blowing, at length drew them out upon the opposite bank, where he staggered from exhaustion. Durgy lost no time in dropping with his clinging burden to the ground.

His first impulse was the masculine one to chide the girl he had rescued for her temerity. But as he glanced at her he saw at once that, notwithstanding her wet and bedraggled condition, she was unmistakably pretty, and with a self-restraint equally masculine, under the circumstances he refrained. When he released her she did not fall, but, after a few gasps for breath, tottered to a tree and leaned against it. Here she dashed the water from her hair and eyes, and discreetly wrung her garments. The ranchman busied himself with his horse, which was badly spent, and had scraped himself a trifle against the rough rocks.

As soon as possible he turned his attention to his fair companion. She was still leaning against the tree, and quietly awaiting the result of his scrutiny.

"Rather a close call," he remarked, pleasantly.

The girl laughed, and said, "I reckon." She glanced at Lone Star, who was shaking himself like a huge water-dog. "How did your horse stand it?"

"All right. He's a little winded, thet's all, and the rocks cut him up some. You must have wanted to get across pretty bad to try the ford such a day as this," Durgy hazarded.

The girl blushed. Then she shivered. "Yes, I did; but that's all right," she said, curtly. "It was mighty lucky you happened around. I can swim a little, but don't believe I could have done much." She laughed again nervously. "I reckon you saved my life. Now my pony's gone, do you reckon you can take me home?"

Durgy glanced at his horse. "I shouldn't wonder. Where do you live?"

"At Sheriff Townsend's."

"Are you his daughter?"

"I am."

"I want to know! Well, I reckon you'd better climb up, and I'll foot it. You can manage, I reckon."

"After a fashion," the girl replied, "if you'll go slow."

He held the stirrup for her and assisted her into the saddle, where she perched with one knee over the pommel.

"Go on," she said, as Durgy took the bridle, preparatory to leading Lone Star. "You can see the house up on the divide there. And—one moment."

Durgy turned and faced her.

"You needn't say I was tryin' to get across the river. Draw it a little mild."

Durgy nodded. Leading the horse slowly, he started for the cottage.

III

THE cottage of Sheriff Townsend was perched on the summit of a long divide that afforded an extensive survey of the surrounding country. Several times, as they paused in the tedious ascent, Mr. Durgy inhaled his breath with a sense of the growing altitude, and cast an admiring glance over the landscape below him. There was Wild Cat River, from which they had but recently emerged, writhing between banks of fertile greenness at his feet, and far beyond, his own ranch, fringed by distant blue hills, over which an eagle was wheeling aloft on motionless pinions. He caught a glimpse, on a distant slope, of several flashing white bodies, which his eye readily detected to be a herd of antelopes. A succession of pistol shots came faintly to his ear.

"The hunters seem to be aware thet game is right plenty to-day," he said to his fair companion, with an air of attempting conversation.

The girl smiled down at him from her lofty perch on his chestnut gelding. "Oh, that's only papa practisin'," she said, quickly. "He keeps that up reg'lar every day since he's been able to get about. He's down in the pecan grove back of the house, I reckon."

"What does he shoot at?"

"Beer-bottles—mostly ; tomato-cans—sometimes—

when the bottles give out," the girl replied. "He don't have much to say about it, but I reckon he knows what he's up to, so I don't bother him much. Well, if there ain't Calico, the old rascal!" she suddenly ejaculated, as they came in full view of the cottage, and beheld a small sorrel mustang leisurely cropping the grass in front of the gate. "He ought to be licked within an inch of his life. I reckon I can catch him on horseback. Mebbe you better go down to the grove and keep papa busy talking, while I get myself to rights. I can manage mother if I'm let alone. Remember to 'draw it mild' about the river."

Durgy looked up at the still dripping naiad, glancing down saucily at him. In spite of her wet garments clinging uncomfortably to her figure, in spite of her bedraggled tresses, and a certain chilly pinched look in the face, which the brisk breeze of the summit was momentarily augmenting, the eyes that met his own were very roguish and interesting. With a peculiar tremor that suddenly passed over him, and which he did not attribute to his recent immersion, he instantly made a mental resolve to "draw it very mild"—even if it led him to actual prevarication. And so hesitating, he turned away. But as he walked he felt the subtle fascination of the young woman still thrilling his pulses. He began to realize that there might perhaps be good ground for the magnetic influence which he had formerly heard this daring girl was wont to exert over her various lovers. So thinking, his hand sought his pocket-book in order to glance over again the singular missive he had

found that morning. But he was startled by a volley of shots from the grove below him. Thus suddenly recalled to his present surroundings, he hastily ran down the hill and entered the grove.

He had no sooner penetrated its shady confines than he perceived, at a short distance from him, the absorbed figure of the sheriff. He was standing in front of a small table, which had been roughly knocked together out of a few boards, and was painfully loading with his left hand a large frontier Colt's revolver. As the occupation necessitated his turning the cylinder and inserting the cartridges with the same hand, the process was necessarily slow. His right side, which was turned towards Durgy, exposed his crippled arm — the result of his recent accident, and which he had steadily refused to have amputated — still asserting its lost power in the sleeve of his coat, and holding the revolver in position by pressing it against his body. Sheriff Townsend was a large, powerful man, with a singularly determined expression of mouth and jaw. He wore no beard, and it was currently reported that since his accident his charming daughter had been his barber; but the expression which his closely-shaven face revealed frankly to an appreciative public was that of a thoroughbred bull-dog in an exceptionally ugly mood. This suggestive appearance was accented by a disposition to wear his hair cropped close, and by certain lines due to pain and suffering, which had not, it may be remarked, tended to refine his features.

Mr. Durgy, as he remarked the general resemblance



THE SHERIFF RAISED THE WEAPON SLOWLY IN HIS LEFT HAND

I have noted, was so impressed by it this morning that he forebore to intrude at once upon the sheriff's privacy. He halted in his tracks, and remained breathlessly watching the latter's every movement. Having loaded his weapon, the sheriff raised it slowly in his left hand, as if about to shoot. The gesture indicated the direction of his marksmanship. With an amusement that almost found vent in a shout of laughter, Durgy saw a number of beer-bottles perched on the tops of bowlders and vinegar-kegs surrounding the sheriff in a rude semicircle.

He had hardly noticed the various targets when the sharp-shooting began. The sheriff handled his revolver with admirable dexterity, wheeling from left to right with great rapidity, and as his pistol dropped to the horizontal, in each instance a tremendous explosion followed. When the smoke lifted, it was apparent that two of the five bottles still remained intact. Raising his revolver slowly, Mr. Townsend shattered one of these to atoms with a final shot; and then dropping the smoking arm, and picking up a piece of chalk, he limped painfully to a long board that leaned against a neighboring tree trunk. Upon this he recorded the result of his last volley, and for a moment remained in serious contemplation of former scores. The sheriff's record was faithful, but not scholarly. It ran as follows :

Munda	—	Oktobre 5.	—	13	broke	5	mist.
Toosda	—	"	6.—14	"	1	"	
Wensda	—	"	7.—15	"	0	"	
Thersda	—	"	8.—	7	tummaty	Kans board	Nun mist.
Fryda	—	"	9.—14	—	Kleen Swepe	—	bar one.

He was still looking at this illiterate testimonial of his prowess as a pistol shot when he heard a dry twig crack beneath an incautious footstep. Wheeling about suddenly, he met the brown eyes and handsome lineaments of William Durgy.

"Howdy?" said that gentleman. "What's up—practisin'?"

"Be ye blind, thet ye can't see?" the sheriff responded, with a sharpness of utterance that was more like a peevish bark than human speech. He limped nimbly back to his pistol and began reloading the arm, his sullen look accented by the interruption.

"No, my eyes ain't gone back on me none jest yet, I reckon," responded Durgy, cheerfully. "But I didn't quite see the object of wastin' so much powder, thet's all."

"Ye didn't, eh?" barked Sheriff Townsend. "Be ye payin' for it?"

"No."

"Waal, then," replied the other, sharply, "s'posin' ye leave thet to the feller thet *is*." He smiled a grim smile that disclosed a set of strong, almost canine teeth. "Thet's a pretty neat score, ain't it?"

Durgy cast an admiring eye over it. "All done with the left, Joe?"

"Sartin," said the sheriff. "Did ye reckon I held the six-shooter in my teeth. 'Jonah,' why don't ye let yer brains save thet tongue o' yourn a trip?"

"I don't see how ye do it," said Durgy, ignoring the other's peevishness.

"Do it? *I got to do it!*" replied the sheriff, paus-

ing in his loading, and bringing his jaws together with a snap like a steel-trap. "Ever sence you sent me on thet fool's errand, and I got them twelve buck-shot in my right arm for my foolishness, ef I don't learn how to sling an ugly left, what in thunder's goin' to become o' my business?"

A pained look stole into Durgy's ingenuous features. "How was I to know, Joe, thet the feller reckoned to lay ye up?" he remonstrated.

"I don't know ez I said ye knowed it," the sheriff responded, testily.

"I met him in the dusk," Durgy continued. "The man was a stranger to me, and was coming from the village. He asked me to tell you thet there was a fight down at the 'Round-up' and some permiskiss shootin', and he wanted to see you about it. Naturally I came in and told ye he was waitin' outside."

"And I went to the door empty-handed, and got both barrels of a shot-gun like a plumb idgit," the sheriff broke in.

"Well, was thet my racket?" inquired the other, deprecatingly.

"Ef you weren't natchally sech a 'Jonah,'" returned the sheriff, bitterly, and raising the mutilated stump of his arm in protest, "I don't know ez I'd thought so much of it; but it's yer bein' that, and me gittin' shot inter the bargain—thet's what gits me!"

"I reckon I am; thet's so," said Durgy, plunging his hands into his trousers-pockets, and gazing down at his boots in apparent despair.

"I reckon ye are," said the sheriff, mercilessly.

"See here," said Durgy, suddenly, stung by the other's manner. "You know what I've always told ye. I've brooded over this thing until I'm plumb crazy about it. If you know the feller that crippled ye, all you've got to do is to tell me who he is, and I'll make him a *fact-similar* of ye. *I will*, so help me!"

The sheriff sneered in infinite scorn. "Do ye see thet score?" he asked.

Durgy nodded.

"What's the total of them figgers?"

"Sixty-three out of a possible seventy."

"Do ye reckon, 'Jonah,'" said Townsend, fiercely, "thet I'm down here every day poppin' away fur the sake of givin' somebody else an opportunity to bury my dead for me?"

He drew himself up with a grim professional pride.

"You hear me? You kin bet yer life I've spotted him; you kin bet your life I'm layin' for him; but it's because I do my own shootin' thet I'm keepin' dark in this bizness. All I sez is thet this finger"—he extended the index finger of his left hand significantly—"is jest itchin', and liable to get St. Vitus's dance from hankerin' to get the drop on him. When I do, the effect on him 'll be suthin' like this."

He raised the revolver as he spoke, and with a sudden quick aim took the head off the last beer-bottle in a twinkling.

Mr. Durgy applauded in genuine admiration.

"Thet's why I'm holdin' this solitary praise-meetin' in this grove every mornin'," Sheriff Townsend con-

tinued, wiping the weapon carefully before restoring it to its holster—"so I kin jest natchally drop thet gentleman ez winged me, and do it proper. I don't ask no assistance whatever. But when I do it, ef you like, I'll call on you to read the burial service over him. He's a likely chap, and p'r'aps you might be able to say suthin' neat on thet occasion."

He paused and reflected a moment. "And ef he should happen to be a little pearter with two hands than I be with one, and should drop me, instead of I him, why, then mebbe *you* might want to apply fur the contract. Ef you should, I hain't no objection, but I will ask ye in thet case to look after little Lou and the old woman, for then, ye see, there wouldn't be no one left to take my place."

"Ye needn't worry on thet score," returned Durgy, warmly. "Ef it should be your hard luck, Joe, to strike a snag and go under, I'll do what I can for the family."

"I reckon ye would, 'Jonah;' I'll do ye thet much credit," said the sheriff. "But, gorramity! whar hev you bin, anyway?" he asked, now for the first time noticing the soaked garments of the other. "Hev you been inventin' a new 'sheep-dip,' thet yer plumb wet through?"

"Hardly, Joe," returned the other, with a forced smile at this malicious allusion to the mistake that had been the beginning of his misfortunes. "The river was a bit high comin' across, and Lone Star and I took a little tumble."

"I reckon so," said the sheriff, eying his compan-

ion. He made an ineffectual effort to extract something from the pistol-pocket of his trousers.

"Here, 'Jonah,'" he said, "ye might take the trouble to git that bottle out for me, bein' ez I'm crippled."

Durgy assisted him, and with some difficulty produced a beer-bottle with a corn-cob cork. It was half full of a light-colored liquid. The sheriff drew the cork with his teeth and extended the bottle.

"This is one I didn't break yet," he said, facetiously. "It's a sort of 'silent comforter' thet I kerry always. Ef you've got any sense you'll give it an introduction to your inside ez a counter-irritant."

"Thank ye," said Durgy. He extended his hand for the bottle. "Here's the hair all off yer head!" he remarked, with easy frontier humor, applying his lips to the bottle. "Say when!"

"When!" shouted the sheriff, anxiously noting the disappearing fluid.

Mr. Durgy stopped promptly, and restored the bottle.

"How does it strike you?"

Durgy laughed. "Well," he said, "seein' ez I don't owe my stomach any particular grudge, Joe, I may say it don't strike me at all."

"Ye never had no taste for the genooine article, 'Jonah,'" the sheriff responded, reprovingly. "This is A1 apple-jack, and no mistake. I reckon ye didn't see anything of Lou down by the river," he continued, tilting the bottle.

"Yes, I did," Durgy replied. "She was down there pickin' wild flowers," he added, boldly.

"Pickin' wild flowers, eh?" returned the sheriff, suddenly removing the bottle from his lips. "It's a nice time of year fur thet bizness. Why didn't ye say pickin' strawberries?"

"Waal, I didn't see any flowers, thet's a fact," Durgy rejoined, quickly, seeing he had made a break; "but thet's what she said she was doin', Joe," he added, ingenuously. "I didn't gainsay it."

"No!" said the sheriff, incredulously. "I reckon thet's one of Lou's 'fibs'—lies, I call 'em. Waal, this pickin' wild flowers and picknickin' gen'rally hez got to be stopped. Thet young gal is too much for me and the old woman, 'Jonah,'" he added, decidedly.

"Girls generally are," said the other, with the air of a philosopher. "Now there was Mrs. Durgy; she was too much for *me*—she was too much for pretty near everybody, but I tried to make the best of it."

"Yes, I know," replied the sheriff, with appreciation; "but this is different. I know Lou's an attractive gal, and all thet, but I don't like her hevin' her own way so. She hez took a notion to goin' down by the river a great deal lately, and I don't know jest what's back of it. I may say thet my comin' down here every mornin' to kinder git my left hand in hez some bearin' on this very subject. I don't reckon to hev any son-in-law in my fam'ly thet I don't fancy. Sooner than thet, I'll do a little shootin', I reckon."

The sheriff brought his jimber jaws together with a click and an expression that were very convincing to Mr. Durgy.

"I see the way you feel about it," he replied.

"Well, Joe, I must be goin'. I've got to get back to the ranch and put on some dry clothes."

"You have, eh?" ejaculated Mr. Townsend, turning again to the table on which his revolver lay. "Well, I'm sorry I can't go back to the house with ye. The fact is I 'ain't quit here fur the day yet. But now ye know my mind," he said, raising the revolver; "ef ye get onto anything in regard to Lou thet ye reckon I oughter know, I'll be obleeged to ye fur lettin' me in on the ground-floor."

Durgy strode rapidly away without replying to this request, and ere he left the grove the echoes were again busy with the rapid target practice of its crippled occupant.

As he approached the sheriff's cottage he beheld Lone Star tethered to the front gate and restlessly awaiting him. Not feeling that his recent efforts in Miss Louise Townsend's behalf had been particularly successful, he unhitched the animal, and throwing himself into the saddle, was riding away, when the opening door of the cottage and an eager hail caused him to draw rein.

It was the fair occupant of his thoughts, who ran out rapidly to meet him, but how changed since the misadventure of the morning! As if in appreciation of the fact that there were other eyes than those of her parents to remark her toilet, she had donned a smart dark-blue gown, lavishly trimmed and beribboned, and fitting her plump figure so perfectly that it was difficult to realize that Miss Louise had been her own dress-maker. The fact that her tresses were

scarcely yet dry had perhaps impelled her to allow them to fall in reckless prodigality all over her neck and shoulders. She was bareheaded, and as the impressionable Durgy with difficulty curbed his impatient horse, he was appreciatively conscious of the heightened color and altogether becoming dishevelment of the young woman running down to the gate.

"Say! how did you make out?" she panted as she reached it, and leaned eagerly over the white palings.

Mr. Durgy glanced at the roguish eyes, the white teeth flashing upon him between the parted lips, the excited interest of the young girl's manner, and an utter disregard for truth and veracity at once took possession of him. He saw that it was out of the question to disappoint the confidence he felt she already entertained in him.

"Oh, I did pretty fair!" he ejaculated, wheeling the impatient Lone Star about.

Miss Townsend gave a relieved sigh, and cast a killing glance at him over the top of the fence.

"Won't you get down and stay to dinner?" she demanded.

"Not to-day," Durgy replied, with a desperation that he felt necessary.

"Miss Lou" looked disappointed, but acquiesced. "Well, some other time, then," she said. "But what did pop say?" her curiosity returning. "Did he ask if I was down at the river?"

"Y-e-s," said Durgy; "he certainly did."

"And you said?"

Mr. Durgy took one more look at the siren face

over the gate, and felt it was perilous to remain longer.

"Say?" he replied. "Why, what could I say, Miss Lou? *I lied, of course, like an honorable man.*"

He found his horse suddenly unmanageable, and dashed away in the direction of Wild Cat River, leaving the maiden gazing admiringly after him.

IV

It was a fortnight after the romantic rescue at the crossing, and an hour after midnight. Mr. Durgy was seated on a sack of cotton-seed in the tent that had served him for a shelter since the burning of his ranch the month before. A hurricane lantern depending from the tent pole afforded him a dim, uncertain light, and, from without, gave his canvas quarters the appearance of a transparency. Although the hour was thus unseasonable, the gentleman was making no preparations for retiring, but was blowing clouds of tobacco smoke from the corn-cob pipe he was smoking, and apparently lost in a reverie inspired by nicotine and despondency. The fact was that in the interval Mr. Durgy had seen much of the society of Miss Louise Townsend, and had enjoyed thereby many pleasant hours and suffered much in secret. To be brief, he was beginning to realize that he was deeply in love. A consciousness of the deplorable

state of his finances and the strange fatality that hung over him was far from alleviating his disquietude. Granted that the charms of the lively and debonair young woman it had been his fortune to meet had been sufficient to obliterate his grief for the loss of his former helpmeet, what, pray, had he to offer the object of his fascination? But his reflections can be hardly said to have progressed thus far. A more tangible perplexity presented itself. Could he flatter himself that his passion was reciprocated? Mr. Durgy was by no means positive.

He had improved the interval to take dinner several times at the Townsend cottage. "Miss Lou" had met him with a frank and cheerful greeting, treated him with marked coolness in the presence of her irritable father, and flirted desperately with him whenever her sire's back was turned. Mr. Durgy had not known what to make of this eccentric behavior. While charmed and thrilled by the condescension of her conduct in private, he was correspondingly disconcerted by her public attitude. In his perplexity he had made a confidant of his foreman—a certain long-haired philosopher who shared his tent with him, and looked after the affairs of his ranch in his absence. This individual was at present snoring stertorously, in blissful unconsciousness of Durgy's protracted vigil.

"Obadiah, what do you allow that a gal thinks of you when she makes faces at you before the old man, and is uncommon sweet if he's out of the way?" Mr. Durgy had inquired.

Mr. Obadiah Hawkins took out a large clasp-knife, and, cutting off a liberal chunk from a plug of tobacco, stowed it away in his capacious mouth, and brought his slow faculties to bear upon the subject. "What do you call bein' 'oncommon sweet?'" he remarked, tentatively.



"WHAT DO YOU CALL BEIN' 'ONCOMMON SWEET'?"

Mr. Durgy, thus challenged for a bill of particulars, displayed a reluctance to expatiate.

"Women is different," said the sage he had invoked, ejecting a copious libation of tobacco-juice with unerring aim upon a wandering beetle as he pursued his meditations—"ez various and onsartin ez—Missouri mules. Ye can't jedge by their bright eyes and the length of their ears what's their capacity fur bein' druv in double harness. Now I axes ye, ez a question of fact, whether she allows ye to sit by?"

Mr. Durgy considered this doubtful interrogatory, and replied in the affirmative.

"Will she stand if you flirt a rein over her back now and then?" asked the philosopher.

Mr. Durgy hesitated.

"Does she rear any when you put the curb onto her?" pursued his imperturbable friend.

Mr. Durgy was too confused to reply.

"Because, ef she does," continued the oracle, calmly, not heeding his silence, "ye 'ain't got the whip-hand of her yet.

"When I was teamin' it between Lampasas and San Saby," pursued his unique authority, launching

put my theories inter play on the mules in the daytime, and evenin's I'd try my hand with the gal. I was ekally successful with both. Come spring, the mules hed kicked my front teeth out, and the woman hed all my back hair. I 'lowed I'd quit teamin' it and make a break fur liberty and the frontier.

"Afore I quit, however, the gal one day up and died. She made, I reckon, about the most beautiful corpse I ever see in her coffin. And I was powerful fond of her, notwithstanding all her treatment. Why, Bill, thet gal hed the beautifulest and longest hair I ever see! I could hev got over a hundred dollars for what she was buried with, but I wouldn't hev thought of it!"

Mr. Durgy was not edified by these reminiscences, nor did he think that any light had been thrown upon his own case by their recital.

While pondering, at this unusual hour, the peculiar misery of his condition, he was suddenly startled by a sound without, as of some one dismounting. A second later a heavy hand was laid upon the tent flaps, and without further formality a tall form stooped and entered. The stranger was muffled to the throat in a long black overcoat, beneath which his heavy riding-boots, magnificently spurred but streaked with mud, gave signs of hard riding. A broad sombrero, adorned with tarnished silver lace, was doffed as he came in, disclosing a pair of snapping black eyes, and a heavy mustache that drooped with the dampness of the night air. The face of the intruder was tanned from exposure. Although at first glance Durgy had a

vague impression of having met this striking individual somewhere before, he surmised that he was some belated traveller, and vouchsafed him a perfunctory "Howdy!" after the fashion of the frontier.

"Howdy!" the stranger replied, stroking his heavy mustaches embarrassedly between the fore and middle fingers of his left hand. He thrust the other into a side pocket of his overcoat, and producing a handsome pocket-flask richly mounted in silver, extended it hospitably towards Durgy. "I looks towards you, pardner," he said.

Durgy took the flask thus generously proffered, and removing the stopper, drank a small sip of its contents. "I don't know who you are, stranger," he rejoined as he restored it, "but travellers with your style and refreshments are scarce up this way. Take a seat and make yourself comfortable."

The stranger seated himself on a nail keg, the only available accommodation at hand, took a pull at the flask, and, after a few moments' reflection, delivered himself abruptly.

"Lou tells me you done me a good turn th' other day at the crossing," he remarked, turning his grave eyes on Durgy with a certain business-like solemnity. "I was late myself to my appointment on account of a little unpleasantness with a friend of mine over an epidemic of kings in a game of 'draw.' I onderstand the river was up, and you saved the gal's life, or something of thet kind. Ez bizness brought me up this way, I reckoned I'd drop in and allow thet the drinks was on me."



"I LOOKS TOWARD YOU, PARDNER"

The dark-eyed stranger stroked his mustaches and extended the flask again. Durgy waved it aside good-humoredly.

"Thank ye!" he rejoined. "Thet's all right. It's a pretty poor man that won't ride into a river ahoss-back to save a young woman."

"Yes, I know," returned the man. "All the same ye done me a favor; but I might ez well say, too, right now, thet ye needn't kerry it too far. It's for you to know thet she's my gal, and I'd jest ez lief you wouldn't take the trouble to call often."

Durgy stared at this, but did not reply.

"Thet's the size of it!" said the stranger, abruptly, levelling his black brows pointedly at Durgy. "And now, how's things with you, anyway? You've had a fire, 'ain't you?"

Durgy, too surprised at the stranger's recent request to command himself, nodded vaguely at this.

"I heard of it down below," said the man. "I gen'rally keep the run of things. Well, about how much would it natchally take to set you on your feet again?"

"I don't believe five thousand dollars would do it," exclaimed Durgy, despondently.

"It's ez bad ez thet, eh?" said the man, stroking his mustaches as he rose to his feet. "Well, remember what I said, keep close to hum, and perhaps ye might wake up some mornin' and stumble on thet amount. Meanwhile—luck is runnin' my way—p'r'aps this may help you to get things to rights."

As he spoke, he flung something that struck heavily at Durgy's feet, and turning, passed rapidly out

into the night. With a murmur of remonstrance, the ranchman stooped and groped for the fallen object. In a few seconds he rose, with features working with mortification, and holding shamefacedly in his hand a plump leathern purse. Uttering a cry of protest, he dashed out of the tent.

But he was too late to check the departure of his visitor. Already the galloping footsteps of a steed resounded loudly in the still night, and straining his eyes, he saw a rapidly vanishing figure on a piebald horse melt away under the faint light of the stars. Stumbling back into the tent again, Durgy bent down, and turned out the contents of the purse ruefully upon the head of the nail-keg the stranger had just quitted. He counted the coins and notes carefully as he swept them back slowly into the leathern purse. There were gold double-eagles that flashed brightly in the rays of the lantern, and several bills of large denominations. The ranchman's eyes dilated with amazement as he estimated the amount of his visitor's gift.

"Nine hundred dollars, as I'm a living sinner!" he finally ejaculated, the perspiration standing out upon his brows in the eloquence of his surprise.

The recumbent figure on the floor of the tent rolled over and lifted its head, rubbing it drowsily with a horny hand, and staring sleepily through its tousled locks.

"How much?" he gasped.

"Nine hundred dollars," repeated Durgy, excitedly; "and darn me, Obadiah, if I don't think it's the same fellow thet shot Joe Townsend!"

V

THE events of the previous night, and the late hour at which he had retired, did not tend to alleviate the perplexity of Mr. Durgy's mind on the following day. He awoke after a troubled sleep, and found himself face to face with the horns of a series of dilemmas that goaded him to desperation. The suspicion of the stranger's identity, which had now grown to absolute conviction, made it out of the question that he could accept his munificent generosity even as a temporary loan. If he were right in his belief that this man was the individual who had sent him on the errand that had resulted so disastrously to the sheriff, he ought rather to have shot him on sight than to have permitted him even the rude hospitality of his tent. Again, granting that he was not mistaken, how was he to seek out this mysterious personage and restore to him the proffered money? Nor were these the only reflections that disturbed him as he carefully locked the despised purse in his camp-chest and pondered the situation. He was confident, after his experience in the grove, that it would not be wise to attempt to imply to Sheriff Townsend that he had succeeded in detecting the identity of his assailant. He had received a sufficient hint that anything of that kind would be regarded as meddlesome. His heart

alike rebelled against acquainting the sheriff with the discovery of his daughter's lover. His own loyalty to the young lady forbade that. And to put the finishing touch to his irritation, there was the stranger's request that he should not call upon Miss Townsend in the future. Of course Mr. Durgy did not entertain this absurd proposal for an instant, but he realized none the less that his contempt for it would be eventually hazardous. Nevertheless, after due consideration, during which the day had slipped away into the mellow afternoon, he arrayed himself in his holiday attire and paid a visit to his Dulcinea.

He found "Miss Lou" in an unusually tractable frame of mind, and to his plea that she would take a short ramble with him on so pleasant a day the young lady gave a willing assent. Without subjecting her infatuated escort to the misery of waiting while she equipped herself for this pilgrimage, she took a light Panama hat of her father's from the hat-rack, twisted a blue veil around it, harpooned it to her head with a long hat-pin, and her toilet was complete.

Mr. Durgy was of course charmed by this delightful alacrity, and as they sauntered down the long divide in the direction of Wild Cat River, he was correspondingly appreciative and demonstrative. He noted with a thrill of pleasure every detail of her attire—how daintily her small white collar clasped her slender neck, and how superbly her brown dress fitted her. As she tripped beside him he had a pleasant suggestion of some graceful antelope fawn in the perfection of her pretty paces. The little truant locks

escaping from the audacious hat seemed to curl about her glowing cheeks with quaint caresses; and her eyes were so dangerously bright! Small wonder that her rude cavalier felt a humiliating sense of the inferiority of the sterner sex as he swung along beside her with his long and heavy stride, and helped her over certain dangerous places with an embarrassed consciousness of being all arms and legs. But the half-delirious ecstasy by which these awkward efforts were accompanied received all at once a heavy check. As "Miss Lou" extended her hand to him across a small runnel in the hill-side, preparatory to being "jumped across," a gorgeous bracelet, which had hitherto been hidden beneath her sleeve, suddenly slipped from her arm and fell with a tiny splash into the water.

The girl gave a shrill cry of dismay, and stooped suddenly to repossess it. Quick as she was, her companion was before her. Their hands met in the tiny streamlet in the search for the lost ornament. Durgy was the first to find it. He held it up, still dripping, and put it into her unresisting hand. The words of an old Scotch betrothal catch flashed through his mind, and with rash precipitancy he repeated it.

"'Over running water my heart I give to thee,'"

he stammered.

Miss Townsend's fingers recoiled suddenly from his grasp, still holding the bracelet. She shook the water from it hastily, with a heightened color. Then quietly clasping it on her arm again, she folded her hands

and looked reprovngly at him. The silence that fell between them was not reassuring.

Miss Townsend was the first to break it. "You mustn't talk like that to me," she said.

"Why not?" Durgy inquired.

"Miss Lou" bit her lip in embarrassment, and her eyes became downcast.

"Never mind why," she said. "It's enough that I tell you you mustn't."

"That's because I haven't the money to give you bracelets and rings like those," he retorted, with sudden bitterness.

"Miss Lou" raised her eyes and shot a defiant glance at him, but whipped her hands quickly behind her, on one of which a large amethyst glittered. She became suddenly austere. "May I ask what you mean by that?" she inquired, coldly.

"I mean," said Mr. Durgy, excitedly, carried away by the current of his emotions, "that I ain't no high-toned, fine-haired chap with black eyes and long mustaches, kitin' through the kentry at mysterious hours and distributin' elegant juley; I ain't receivin' precious notes thankin' me kindly for such presents, and then leavin' 'em flyin' all over the purrara to be read by everybody; I ain't callin' personally on decent men, and insultin' 'em for doin' an ordinary service for a young woman by flingin' 'em fabulous sums in leather purses. All the same I reckon I know them ez is."

The silence that followed this tirade was very impressive. In the midst of it the faint echo of a pistol

shot from the grove beyond the hill rang through the stillness. To Durgy's mind the sharp sound had the significance of an avenging Nemesis. "Miss Lou" tossed a light twig she held in her hand away from her.

"Dear old pop!" she said, affectionately, a smile struggling to her face. "He's practisin' again. Mr. Durgy—since you seem to know so much of my own matters—if I should marry suddenly not to suit the old folks, and go away to live in some other place, would you do me a favor by bein' kind to 'em, and try and keep 'em from bein' too lonely for me?"

This request was so sudden and ill-timed that Durgy turned towards her. "Miss Lou" was glancing at him across the tiny rivulet with a pathetic pleading in her eyes. All trace of irritation had vanished. She had apparently shed his recent sarcasm with perfect serenity. With a helpless gesture he turned away. His surprise and bewilderment at the turn affairs had taken were so complete that he apparently communicated them in confidence to the adjacent hill-side.

"I ask her to marry me," he repeated, in a low tone, "and she tells me she's goin' to marry somebody else, and wants me to take care of the old woman and the old man. Well, now, I *will* be eternally blowed!"

When they were returning home again, after a somewhat embarrassing walk along the picturesque Wild Cat River, during which the circumstances of the rescue at the crossing were presented vividly to the minds of both, Miss Townsend became suddenly confidential.

"I hope you won't think me rude or ungrateful on account of anything I may have said to-day," she re-

marked, abruptly, turning to the man at her side. "You see how it is. When I met you, Mr. Durgy, I can't say that I was really free. Jim and I are old friends, you know. We met long ago at a ball, had a desperate flirtation, and have been fond of each other ever since. As I wasn't quite sure whether father would take to Jim, and Jim was very high-strung and bound to see me, I've had to meet him unbeknown. I reckon it wasn't quite right, but what help was there? It would never do to have father and Jim run foul of each other, and I had to do the best I could."

She gave a little shrug of her shoulders as she said this, and a half-helpless wave of her dimpled hand.

"I see how it is," said Durgy, grimly. "And so you're goin' to marry this man—to elope with him, by way of makin' it easy like and sociable for the old folks at the cottage."

"Miss Lou" resented this sally. "Whatever we mean to do, or not to do, I reckon it's our own affair," she said, shortly, "Certainly not yours. If Jim wants to marry me, and is able to do it, I don't know as it's necessary, when I'm almost of age, for him to ask father, and get a flat refusal, and a pistol bullet into the bargain. You know father's general tactics when arguments fail."

Mr. Durgy's expression showed very plainly that he did, but his reply did not impeach the sheriff's methods.

"A dose of lead is altogether the best argument in some cases," he answered, gravely. "Your father has

a very decided way of looking at most things. It isn't for me to criticise him or pass remarks on his conduct. But granting Jim is all you say he is, I reckon it makes no difference to you how he comes by his money or where he gets it."

The words had no sooner left his lips than he regretted them. He saw the girl's breast heave and her eyes blaze with the sudden anger they excited. She turned upon him with a fine scorn in her black eyes that made his blood tingle.

"If I'd once run a faro bank and been ruined by one of my own customers, I don't believe I would have much to say about the ways of my neighbors," she said. "Good-afternoon, Mr. Durgy; you needn't come to see me again until you've a mind to be more civil."

Turning her back upon him abruptly, she left him standing in the road, and walking briskly back to the cottage, she slammed the gate violently behind her as she vanished into the house.

VI

LEFT thus alone in the road, William Durgy stood gazing helplessly after Miss Townsend, as her swift footsteps took her rapidly from his view. Not until the closing of the cottage door that marked her arrival home came faintly to his ear did he rouse himself from his discomfiture. Then kicking a stone angrily that

lay in his path, he plunged both hands into his trousers' pockets, and with downcast head and drooping shoulders took a circuitous path over the divide, so as to reach the barn without being seen from the cottage. Here he found his tethered horse expectantly awaiting him. The animal greeted him with a whinny of welcome, and playfully rubbed his cool satin muzzle against his bearded cheek as he untied the lariat which held him. Something about this demonstrative fondness touched Durgy. A sudden sense of loneliness, of mortification, came over him, and he threw one arm affectionately around the glossy neck, and bowed his head upon the shoulder of his steed. He twined his fingers in the luxuriant mane and gripped him hard, while his brain whirled with a disheartening conviction of human ingratitude. The animal stood stock-still at the rude caress, and seemed to quiver through all his glorious muscles with an equine sympathy. It seemed to the lonely man, in that brief moment of communion, that this dumb creature, which he had only given his daily pittance of corn and the scant attention of an idle hour, was a thousand times more loyal than the girl whose life he had saved.

Ashamed of his weakness, and yet in a sense comforted by the reflection, he vaulted into the saddle, and as the noble horse, in accordance with his frontier training, broke at once into a gallop and bore him speedily away, he smiled grimly to himself, and leaning forward in his stirrups, patted his neck lightly, until Lone Star responded with a wild snort and a toss

of the head that seemed to the man's excited fancy a contemptuous commentary on all womankind.

His mind, stung by anger and resentment, was busy with the events of the afternoon as he went galloping down the long divide. What had he said, pray, that should induce this impetuous young woman to cashier so suddenly one to whom she was so lastingly indebted? He was not the man to overestimate himself or his services. With the chivalrous gallantry of his nature, he could do his duty and treat it as lightly as another, but when he felt his act slighted, forgotten, or regarded as a mere bagatelle, he told himself, with a bitter grimace, that Miss Townsend owed to him the fact that she was alive to treat him so cavalierly. Not call upon her, indeed! Certainly he would not. She need not flatter herself that he would humiliate himself to that extent. And yet, as this thought flashed through him, a conviction of how he had grown to love the sheriff's daughter made this self-denial seem but a hollow mockery.

The sun had set, and the brief twilight of Texan latitudes had lapsed into the shadows of evening. A star came out suddenly and burned with a fiery glimmer over the farther trees as he reached the river crossing. Without hesitation Lone Star plunged into the shallows, and picking his way into the middle of the stream, stopped mid-leg deep to drink of the swiftly flowing water. With the bridle loosely hanging in his fingers, and the sullen rush of the water dimpling past him, the ranchman fell to pondering in the dusky gloom the mysterious identity of the stranger who

seemed to hold the affections of his inamorata by such a subtle fascination. Who was this man, and had he possibly mistaken his calling? And with the query the conscious blood surged in his cheeks at the taunt she had flung him over his half-forgotten past, and he twitched the bridle in unconscious impatience with the irritation of the reflection.

Lone Star raised his head at the interruption, and with dripping muzzle and ears pricked forward, seemed to interrogate the silent obscurity before him. The animal's action recalled Durgy to himself. What was that? A sudden sound like that made by galloping feet echoed through the still night. Somebody was certainly coming at a high rate of speed along the opposite shore of the river. He heard the pounding hoofs of a horse, the jingle of spurs, and a low word of encouragement, as if given to a laboring animal. The sounds came nearer. The next instant there burst from the foliage of the farther bank the dim apparition of a mounted man riding with the fury of a meteor along the open plain, an occasional spark flying from the glowing cigar he was smoking in spite of the killing pace at which he travelled.

In a second the horseman was abreast of him, and Durgy, rising in his stirrups with the surprise of the moment, was fancying he heard the panting breath of horse and rider, when a quick stream of fire shot from a neighboring clump of willows, and a sharp report rang out over the stream. The galloping horse shied suddenly, there was a loud oath, and the next instant a succession of quick flashes rent the curtain of night,

during which Durgy beheld the mounted figure, erect and menacing with a brandished revolver, but still cantering away. The firing suddenly ceased, and the reverberations had hardly died away among the hills when he again heard the galloping footsteps, growing fainter and fainter. Rousing his own horse, which had stood mute and motionless during this masked fusillade with a stolidity that marked his frontier training, he plunged forward in the darkness amid blinding spray until he reached the opposite bank. As he emerged upon the open plain he was confronted under the pale light of the stars by a discomfited figure on a white horse.

"Who goes, I call?" came the sharp challenge.

"Bill Durgy," was the quiet answer.

"The — you say!" returned the voice, as if in soliloquy.

"Is that you, sheriff?" inquired the ranchman, peering through the obscurity.

"No," said the voice. "Durn me ef I'll own to it. A man thet can make ez clean a miss with a carbine ez I done jest now at a feller he was layin' fur ain't no sheriff; he's only what's left of one. I grant ye he 'was goin' like a locomotive, and a left-handed man ain't built for a rifle; but I was so close to him I reckon I'd hit him ef I'd shied the gun at him. The only satisfaction I got out of it was lyin' thar in them willows, an seein' him pepper everything he could see within a quarter of a mile. 'Jonah,' if you ever ketch me away from the ranch agin without my six-shooter, I'll give you a runnin' shot at me with a start of forty

yards. Don't ask no questions now ; I know my business. You can't git nothin' out of me. I simply says thet ef I ever git the drop on thet lad again, and miss him, I'm done pullin' triggers. Remember what ole Joe says to you. Savey now? G'lang! *Adios!*"

VII

SEVERAL days later the ranchman was sitting in front of his tent smoking a contemplative pipe, and whittling in the preoccupied manner which all meditation assumes on the frontier, when he was surprised by a visit from his foreman. That uncouth philosopher dismounted from his cow-pony, and shambling forward in the heavy leathern leggings which encumbered his lower limbs, threw himself at full length on the ground at his side, and explained the object of his visit in an undertone, as if soliloquizing to the distant landscape.

"I've been a-ridin' sence sun-up all through the lower valley huntin' a dozen head of them durned wild steers, brand, 'O-H-Triangle. 'I 'ain't seen hide nor hair. Rube tells me they lit out night afore last, and he allows they're over on Tepe Creek. I reckoned I'd better git over thar, and look 'em up."

William Durgy shut up his clasp-knife, and rose to his feet with the splinters of his late whittling still clinging to his ducking trousers. "I'll do that," he

said. "You stay by the ranch. It won't hurt me any to shake myself up a little."

"I reckon you're right thar, Bill," said the other, slowly; "but I sorter allowed you was due at the sheriff's about to-day. Ye ain't been thar this week yet, hev ye?"

Durgy gave a vicious brush to the knees of his trousers. "No; nor I ain't likely to," he said, shortly.

"Hello!" said the other, glancing at him quickly from under his heavy hat, and then apparently becoming absorbed again in the outlying prairie. "Anything up? Are bets off in that direction? Hope I won't hev to hedge none, fur Rube and me's in pretty deep on thet a'ready."

Without a word Durgy turned his back on his foreman, and walked away to where Lone Star was picketed.

"Kinder queer!" said Mr. Hawkins, reflectively, still to the distant landscape. "'Ain't hed so much to say about her lately. I reckon the wires is down fur the present. Hed a spat most likely. But they'll patch it up," he remarked, with composure, filling his pipe slowly from a buckskin pouch. "And durn me ef I hedge on it! It sorter puts me in mind of my own luck in thet line."


He picked up the stick the ranchman had lately been whittling, and fell to work on it with a dogged persistency that had in it a suggestion of rivalry, as he abandoned himself to his musings.

The ranchman was already galloping over the plain, feeling the exultation of the good horseman, as he put



THAT UNCOUTH PHILOSOPHER SHAMBLERED FORWARD

rod upon rod of the prairie behind him. Intent upon the experiences of the past week, he scarcely noticed the details of the country through which he travelled—the rolling billows of prairie, the scattered patches of mesquite, the occasional chaparrals through which he dashed. Startled quail sometimes skurried across his path, a jack-rabbit blundered from its form, or a flock of ducks rose in frightened clamor from a still pool as he galloped by. Of these customary sights and sounds he took no notice. Only, as he passed through the scattered bands of cattle that roamed the valleys, Durgy scanned their scarred sides for the brand of ownership. Yet, although his mind was busy with other things, he noted with the general eye of experience that the cattle were sleek and well-conditioned for the coming winter; that the range was good and water plenty; and felt a natural encouragement, therefore, in spite of his misfortunes. The strange, unaccountable spring in his temperament, which had sustained him through so many trials, asserted itself again under the exhilaration of his rapid motion, and, with an amusement that quite surprised him, he found himself putting Lone Star to his paces, in a brush with a frightened rabbit. At this swinging gallop he came suddenly upon Tepe Creek, and there, amid the lush vegetation and willow coverts that fringed this well-known region, he surprised the dozen estrays of which he was in quest. Rounding up these wild-eyed cattle, which fled, with slaver-dripping jaws and fresh grasses still in their mouths, from the hallooing of his close pursuit, he swept them out



of the wooded valley and into the open plain, where he started them homeward in a wild chase.

He was following them at a leisurely canter, when he came unexpectedly out of a neighboring thicket upon the crest of a high divide that overlooked the San Angelo stage-road where it crossed the outlying prairie. The bare sombre plain lay stretched below him in all its bleak monotony, and as his eye fell upon it, an unusual feature of the prospect caused him to pull up suddenly. An eighth of a mile away the four-horse coach was halted on the dusty highway. The driver sat upon his box, but with one hand raised, apparently in an attitude of restraint. Glancing in the rear of the big vehicle, Durgy saw the entire outfit of passengers drawn up in an awkward squad upon the plain, with hands above their heads, as if in silent protest against some flagrant outrage. In front of this mute line of witnesses a tall individual moved with careful regularity, accompanied by a piebald horse that kept close at his elbow, as if broken to the practice.

The whole scene was a sufficiently familiar one on the frontier, and had a ready significance to Durgy. He knew at once that the San Angelo coach was being "held up" by a "road-agent." But the sight of the piebald horse and a swift suspicion as to his owner thrilled him with a conviction of the identity of the highwayman.

In the suddenness of his surprise he gave a loud view-halloo that seemed to cause a commotion among the group. There was a hurried movement along the

line; the tall man sprang into the saddle, covering the men with a large revolver. The whole squad, under this armed surveillance, bundled themselves quickly into the coach, still apparently protesting with outstretched hands. As the driver gathered up his reins, the words "Let her go!" came faintly to Durgy's ear, and the coach started at a gallop. The robber remained motionless in the saddle, continuing to menace the departing equipage with his levelled pistol until it had apparently withdrawn to a safe distance. Then wheeling his horse suddenly, he put him at once into a run, and came diagonally across the plain in a direction that the ranchman felt sure would afford him a good view of him. Involuntarily he drew his carbine from its leathern holster and retreated into the cover. For a few moments he fully expected that he might be able, by a well-directed shot, to bring the daring outlaw to justice; but when half-way across the plain the latter's purpose evidently changed. With a loud shout to his mustang he wheeled him abruptly again, and gripping him tight with his knees made off at another angle. The evolution brought the person of the horseman in full view of Durgy, but he was too far away to risk a shot. He caught a glimpse of the long dark hair waving beneath the broad sombrero, the drooping mustaches, and the general dress and bearing of the rider. He was sure it was his midnight visitant of some weeks since.

Trembling with the import of this fateful discovery, he did not move from his position until the fleet horse had borne his rider across the intervening prai-

rie and vanished from view in a fringe of timber. Rousing himself at last, he broke from the cover and started homeward at a round pace, his heart bounding so with exultation over his discovery that he came near forgetting the errand that had brought him on his long ride. After some search among the timber he discovered his winded cattle in a shady pecan motte, and started them homeward again with the shrill cry of the cowman. This time he did not suffer them to slacken their pace until he reached his own acres, and saw the panting, dusty creatures mingle with other cattle of his main herd. Then, turning aside in the direction of the river, he checked his sweating horse into a walk, and rode for some time along the wooded stream busy with many reflections.

Lone Star was badly winded, and while slowly traversing a secluded valley in the neighborhood of the crossing, impelled by a half-defined impulse to visit Miss Townsend, and in some manner bridge over the dismissal he had received, Durgy was suddenly hailed from the roadside. The father of the young lady, mounted on his white horse, had halted a few paces in front of him. The grim sheriff, crippled but still potent, sat erect in the saddle, regarding Durgy's reeking horse with apparent curiosity. The ranchman drew rein within hand-shaking distance.

"What's up now?" said Townsend, gruffly, with a wave of his maimed right arm. "Tryin' to founder Lone Star a-trainin' fur some cowboy scrub race? 'Jonah,' thet ain't no way to treat a fine animal."

Durgy laughed at the sheriff's serious manner.

"Chasin' runaway stock over on Tepe," he quietly responded. "Those O-H-Triangle steers need an army to watch 'em, and Lone Star comes in for his share of it; but he can stand it."

"I see," said the sheriff, raising his brows. "Well, I reckoned I'd ride over, and see why I made such a fool o' myself the other night. I 'ain't done kickin' myself fur that miss yet."

Durgy nodded abstractedly. "You're heeled now, I take notice," he said, with a glance at the sheriff's heavy revolvers, both of which hung in his cartridge belt.

"Yes," rejoined the other, glancing significantly at him; "I mean to be."

Durgy returned the glance with appreciation. "If you'd been with me, Joe, this morning, you might have had use for 'em."

The sheriff's nostrils dilated with a sudden interest. "Anything wrong below?"

"Right smart! A fellow held up the San Angelo stage, and went through the whole caboodle."

The sheriff exploded with indignation. "Thet's Jim White, then!" he ejaculated, after a wild apostrophe.

"Who?" inquired Durgy, eagerly.

"I didn't say," returned Townsend, demurely.

"That's all right, Joe," Durgy replied. "Don't!"

"Why didn't you drop him?" the sheriff suddenly inquired a moment later.

The ranchman laughed. "I thought I'd postpone it, seeing I was nearly a quarter away when I sighted him."

"Natchally."

The sheriff sat silent a few moments, and then executed a war-dance of impotent rage in his stirrups.

"Dog-gone it!" he exclaimed. "Ain't that jest my luck? Think of me crippled and tied up here, and thet devil doin' the county! I sent over to Ike Mosely this mornin' asking him to send me two of his best deppyties, and tellin' him Jim White was loose agin, and he sends me word he 'ain't got none to send. Ain't thet a nice fix for a sheriff?"

"It's over the line, Joe," Durgy responded. "It ain't your funeral."

"Thet don't make me feel no better," Townsend retorted. "I oughter been thar."

Durgy reflected a minute. "Is this the same feller you took a pop at the other night?" he suddenly inquired.

"I don't know ez I said anythin' about thet," the sheriff responded, with a grim smile.

"Don't then," said the ranchman, shortly. "How's Miss Lou?"

The sheriff appeared disconcerted by the abrupt transition. He glanced up and down the river a moment, scowled fiercely, and then said: "You don't come over to the shanty none—lately. What's the reason?"

Durgy regarded his heavy riding-boot solicitously. "I received a little instruction on thet head a spell ago," he said, dryly, "and I've been powerful busy ever since."

"Humph!" said the sheriff. "Well, I want to tell

you thet it's my ranch, and Lou isn't running it jest at present. She's pretty free-spoken fur a young woman, I know; but you're not to mind thet. My wife and I'll take it kindly ef you'll come over thar as much as usual."

The ranchman bowed his acknowledgments. Sheriff Townsend's gloomy face assumed a graver expression.

"'Jonah,'" he said, suddenly, leaning forward in his saddle, "I kin trust *you*. There's trouble ahead, and plenty of it. My Lou's fixin' for suthin', and I know it. She's white and scared like; she's lost her gay spirits; she don't eat; she don't sleep; and I ketch her lookin' at me sometimes sorter beseechin', when she reckons I'm dozin' in front o' the fire. A woman can't fool the ole man, 'Jonah!' There's suthin' up—suthin' desperate!"

Mr. Durgy attempted to look sympathetic but unconscious.

"It's more than two months now thet I've been watchin' this," continued the sheriff, darkly. "God knows I love Lou, and I won't see no harm come to her. I know the kind of a woman my daughter is—high-spirited, mettlesome—and so I jest set by and took my own p'int. I knowed she was seein' somebody, but I didn't let her know it, and this afternoon I got on to the hull business. I was up the river a piece, and in a leetle shady nook under a willow the ole mare stumbled over a flat stone. I was mad, and got down to chuck it in the river, when, to my surprise, I see, on liftin' it, a bit of paper under it. I

took it up and opened it, and, durn me! ef I didn't drop to the hull thing."

Here the sheriff put his left hand into a side pocket, and produced a folded slip of paper, which he handed to Durgy.

"See here!" he said. "I know you're fond of Lou. When you read thet, I reckon you'll agree with me that we've both got to look arter her."

Durgy opened the note with fingers that trembled strangely even under the sheriff's eyes.

"DEAR JIM" (the pencilled contents ran),—"I've thought over all you said the last time I saw you, and if you do love me so, dear boy, and it makes you so unhappy, I reckon I must do as you say. But oh! I do so hate to run away without letting papa know! I don't see, I'm sure, what you've got against papa, or he against you, that you can't ask him for me like a man. And what is there about your business, dear, that takes you by here at such awful hours? Sometimes I wake up at night, and think I hear the footsteps of your horse galloping across the river; and I lie awake, listening and thinking, until I drop asleep again, and hear them in my dreams. I don't know what you do, dear boy, but it must be very wearing and hard on your health—such unearthly hours! Well, I won't scold you, for I suppose you can't help it, and you say you'll tell me all about it some day. And now for your plan. Papa *is* going to Ballinger to-morrow (Tuesday), and if you can be at 'The Bower' with two horses at sundown, as you said you could

on that day, I reckon I can get away. There, I've said it! I'm almost afraid to read it over, for fear I'll change my mind. Good-bye; I trust this note will make you happy, dear. And I hope you'll realize how much I must love you to leave father and mother so for your dear sake! . Lou."

Durgy read this epistle through in silence, but with a choking sensation in his throat and a sinking of the heart that he could scarce conceal. When he had finished he refolded it, and passed it back to the sheriff without a word. Townsend eyed him narrowly.

"Thet's a nice thing fur a father to drop to, ain't it?" he said.

The ranchman set his teeth together, and nodded absently. "You have got to be quick about it. What are you going to do?"

"Spot the man, and put a ball through him," said the sheriff, calmly.

"Want any help?"

"I reckon *not*."

"Because if you do," added Durgy, in a strange, calm voice, which he hardly recognized as his own, "why, I'm on hand."

The two men exchanged glances.

Night came. The new moon hung a golden horse-shoe in the west that to the dreamy eye of the fatuous ranchman seemed to argue a change of fortune. Wrapped in his gray blanket, with his head pillowed in the hollow of his saddle, he lay for a long time

awake and meditating. Afar from his covert in some hollow oak a moping owl "hoo-hoo-ed" incessantly, and at intervals the vagabond coyotes raised their dismal ululation. Above him, clear and scintillant, the Dipper shone, pointing with accuracy that nightly compass of the frontiersman, the North Star. Already this steadfast sentinel had made considerable progress towards the zenith, and still the muser tossed uneasily upon his rough pillow.

What was that? A shot! Not loud and detonating, but faint and far. In an instant the restless man was on his feet. Quickly drawing on his riding-boots and catching up his heavy sombrero, he stepped quietly from the tent. The wind was blowing softly from the south, and the Gulf-borne breeze was odorous with its long journey over the fragrant plain. Durgy strode on in the dim night, at times rousing a sleepy wild-duck from some neighboring pool, that scuttled away with peevish clamor among the reeds and water-grasses; anon startled in turn himself by the shrill rustle of a horned toad over the wet prairie, or the warning rattle of some dissipated snake cooling his checkered sides under the breeze of the night.

He had not gone far when his quick ear caught the echo of a familiar sound. Some one else was abroad that balmy night, but mounted, and in haste. He was just climbing a sloping hill, when the rhythmical hoof-beats of a horse came to him on the night wind. Below him lay a peaceful valley, swathed in fleecy mists, through which straggling files of thin mesquites stood like spectres under the pale light of the stars.

The ranchman halted, and removed his hat as he strained his ears to listen. The footsteps were coming nearer. Apparently the horseman would pass in front of him. Suddenly from out the bosom of the misty copse below rose a sharp, demoniac cry. It was answered by a series of shrill yelps and shrieks in quick succession; and then through the fog-clouded valley flitted several weird fantastic shapes in wild panic, leaving behind them a ghostly silence, through which drifted the insistent cadence of hoof-beats.

"Bah!" said Durgy to himself, aloud. "Those miserable coyotes are enough to frighten the ghost of Davy Crocket. I reckon that shot was only some cowboy's protest."

He had scarcely uttered this reflection when the sleeping mists below him were cloven an instant by what seemed a colossal mounted figure, and a horseman riding at a fierce gallop swept into open view. Once clear of the shrouding fog both horse and rider shrank to their true proportions, and with a musical jingle of spurs, a spark struck from some stone in the way, and the accompanying flash of a lighted cigar, the flying figure passed. The dim curtain of the mist received him once more into itself, and the sound of the spurring hoofs as suddenly ceased.

So quickly had this midnight apparition come and gone that, as the ranchman's eye ran over the vague vistas beneath him, he might have been pardoned for imagining the momentary glimpse a mere trick of his overwrought senses. No such doubt, however, disquieted him, for in the brief view afforded him he



THE FLYING FIGURE PASSED

had recognized the unmistakable markings of a piebald horse. And now, as he stood and pondered, the familiar incense of a good cigar, borne on the night air, came slowly up the hill.

VIII

THE anticipated and dreaded Tuesday dawned bright and clear. Durgy was awakened at early dawn by the quarrelsome barking of two prairie-dogs, whose sandy citadel was adjacent to his tent. For a long time he lay quiet, thinking what might be the outcome of the day; but the shrill clamor still continuing, he rose upon one elbow, and pushing the tent flap aside, peered out upon the plain.

The sun was just rising. The first level rays of the blood-red luminary were glancing through the mesquites and sparkling among the dewy grasses. At a short distance from where he lay the ranchman could see the noisy disturbers of his slumbers perched upon the little mound of their burrow, angrily resisting the approaches of a dark object that seemed to be gravely regarding them. They were so near that the bright eyes and palpitating flanks of these pygmy warriors could be plainly distinguished, and in some curiosity as to what was really disturbing their early breakfast, Durgy rose to his feet. Half expecting to find that the cause of their disquietude was some enterprising rattlesnake which was satisfying a long fast by the sacrifice of one of their number, he was the more surprised to see a huge raven rise heavily in the air at

sight of him, and with a hoarse croak, perch in the top of a neighboring mesquite.

As the bird settled itself upon the limb and looked solemnly down upon him, its broad black beak glittered redly in the sunlight of early morning. Although Durgy divined that it had been recently breakfasting upon carrion, yet the bloody token, in view of the unknown sequel of the day just dawning, struck him somehow as ominous. Nor was the eerie feeling quite dispelled by the discovery of a dead coyote, evidently killed by the pistol-shot he had heard the night before, lying stark and rigid with its eyes picked out, a short distance from where his tent was pitched. With a half-superstitious feeling he caught up a stone at his feet and frightened the malevolent bird away.

As the day wore on, a strange disquietude and unrest possessed him. Business was dull at the ranch, and in the lack of actual duties with which to engross his attention, he found his anxiety intolerable. Yet even in this dearth of occupation did the hours drag through, and the westering sun was already far down the sapphire sky when he turned his restless footsteps in the direction of the river.

Reaching the crossing, it seemed to him a strange quiet possessed all things. The river, now fallen to its customary depths, dimpled silently over the ford, and the willows hung above it with no crepitant murmur in their silvern shade. A grossbeak flashed about a limb, and fluttered away into a neighboring covert, unfurling its rosy wings to the idle air listlessly, but without its usual chattering protest. Far away,

crowning the distant divide, the ranchman could see the sheriff's cottage, etched like a minaret against the blue ether. All was apparently quiet in its neighborhood, and even the querulous prairie-dogs, whose pygmy dwellings dotted the long green hill, seemed to have acquired a lazy apathy from their sleepy surroundings.

With a strange lonely feeling that he could neither analyze nor question, Durgy turned away and plunged into the thicket that bordered the river. With hands deep in the pockets of his trousers and bowed head, regardless where his footsteps wandered, he had progressed perhaps a quarter of a mile before he took any heed of his whereabouts. Scarlet tanagers and indigo-birds—the living rubies and sapphires of that emerald cavern—spread their tiny pinions and flashed from tree to tree ahead of him as he listlessly drew near. Half unconsciously he had penetrated a certain bower-like opening of that woodland solitude into which the surrounding thicket suddenly opened. He was traversing this sylvan glade when he was abruptly challenged.

The tone and manner of address as well as its suddenness caused the ranchman to raise his head and spring backward a pace or two. Before him in the wood stood his whilom midnight visitor. But there was about him nothing of that hesitation or embarrassment which characterized his first encounter. The stranger was apparently beside himself with fury, and his black eyes snapped and his fingers were nervously clinched as he thus confronted Durgy. Notwith-

standing his surprise, the ranchman noted that his dashing exterior had suffered somewhat from thorns and brambles. There were several rents in his black overcoat, and on his right cheek there was a furrow of so peculiar a character that in its half-healed condition it suggested an unusual accident. However, he had no opportunity to speculate upon the stranger's appearance, for the latter again accosted him with an abruptness and violence of manner that exceeded his first utterance.

"— your impudence!" he ejaculated, striding forward and menacing him with clinched hands. "What do you mean by blundering in upon me at this time and place?"

Durgy stared blankly at him. "Have you got a mortgage on this river?" he asked, quietly. "If you have, why don't you fence it in?"

"I'm more likely to fence you in," returned the man, threateningly, and gnashing his teeth in a wolf-like rage. "Didn't I tell you to keep yourself this side the river? Didn't I pay you not to interfere between me and Miss Townsend?"

The speech recalled Durgy to himself. For answer he put one hand in the breast of his coat, and drew forth the leathern purse which the other had given him. He flung it contemptuously upon the ground between them. Then he folded his arms, and looked calmly into the black eyes that were fixed upon him.

"I'm glad to have this opportunity of returning thet wallet you dropped in my tent the other night by accident," he said, quietly. "Mebbe, when you

get to know me better, you'll understand that I'm not seekin' money from chance acquaintances, nor acceptin' it from any one to me unbeknownst. All the same, I thanks ye, and returns it."

The stranger spurned the purse with his booted foot. "Let the money lie there," he cried, "until you and I have settled our differences. I'm talking to you about a matter I value more than money or money's worth. I asked you to do me a favor—to keep away from the young woman you'd been fortunate enough to save, and I offered to do what I reckoned was right for the service, with a promise of more if you kept that word, and how have you fulfilled it? By calling on the young woman day in and day out, by takin' walks in her society, by philanderin' here and there and general skylarkin', by making love to her behind my back—by making love to her and slandering me."

He paused with an indignant wave of the hand, took a plug of tobacco from his vest-pocket and nervously bit off a piece of it, throwing the remainder impatiently away. Then, after rolling the weed under his tongue a few seconds with a grimace as if bringing himself face to face with the issue before him, he folded his arms, and again confronted Durgy.

"What I ask you now," he said, deliberately, "is whether you propose to give any heed to my wishes in this business, or whether you're reckonin' to run things in general to suit your own taste?"

Durgy glanced coolly at his questioner. The two rivals for this frontier siren's affections confronted

each other with folded arms, indignant pose, and drawn features. A bounding hare came suddenly through the wood, and catching sight of them, was stricken mute in pulsating terror. A squirrel on a limb above let an acorn fall, so breathless was the little animal's attention. A spotted lizard leered derisively from a neighboring stone at this aggressive tableau of the arch enemy man. But, all unconscious of such interruption, the war of words went on. In the mellow sunlight the ranchman's voice sounded clear and calm.

"What I'm going to do, I haven't said, and I don't know as you've any call to hear. A man that makes his living in the way you do, Jim White, isn't worth the love of a decent woman, nor fit to ask favors of any respectable man."

The outlaw unclasped his arms at this, and drew his revolvers with an exclamation of rage.

"If that's the way you feel about it," he said, with an oath, "I reckon one of us will never leave this place alive. I won't take that from any man, and we'll make an end of this row right here. But I'll be fair about it. Choose whichever one of these barkers you want, and step off ten paces. I'm ready for you as soon as you say the word."

He cocked one of the six-shooters. It has a strange quick jar upon the ear, this cocking of a pistol. Durgy's face blanched, but his eye never quailed. He accepted the weapon mechanically.

"All right," he said, grimly; "if that's your lay you'll find me ready. No man can say that I ever

gave him the go-by. if he called me out. I ain't thet kind, Jim White. I'll back off ten paces, and count three. Whichever dies, may God have mercy upon him !"

No sound was heard in the green wood. The squirrel upon the limb had curled his tail over his back, a watchful but silent spectator ; the hare still cowered trembling beneath a manzanita ; the lizard was dozing in the sunlight.

The outlaw drew himself erect and raised his revolver. Holding his pistol at half-arm, Durgy slowly took ten backward paces.

"One! Two!—"

There was a sudden bright flash and shattering report. The lifted revolver dropped instantly from his opponent's nerveless hand, and with a half-groan he wheeled sharply round and fell heavily upon his face. The ranchman, with bated breath and startled eyes, remained rooted in his place. He lowered his revolver, and half wondering examined the chambers. They were intact.

A second later, with a subdued chuckle, Sheriff Townsend slipped from behind an adjacent bush. He strode to the side of the fallen man, and contemptuously regarded him. "I reckon we're square now, Jim White," he muttered, as he gazed at the black, ragged hole in his temple, from which a crimson stream was dripping hideously down the cheek. "I reckon thet's neat enough for a left-hander, and might satisfy the most fastidys. Mebbe, ef you've got any more fellers to lay up in the kentry where you're goin', ye'll



"CHOOSE WHICHEVER ONE OF THESE BARKERS YOU WANT"

p'r'aps be perlite enough to give 'em some warnin' afore ye turn loose on 'em, now you've started on the long trail."

He turned towards Durgy. "Well, 'Jonah,' I feel right well paid fur all my practisin'."

The ranchman nodded sullenly. "What did you ever do to thet man thet he should take a notion to gun fur you?" he asked.

"Durn me ef you ain't got me now," returned Townsend, with a puzzled look. "But he done it. I've figgerd on thet for a six months, but I reckon 'twar this. I jailed a pardner o' this chap's two year ago down at Lampasas Hot Springs. The two used to hold up everybody on the Belton road in them days, and was clus friends. My dissolvin' the firm, I reckon, kem ruther hard on Jim. Cut down the profits, and interfered consider'ble with his reg'lar bizness. Prob'ly he laid off to git square, and took his own way of doin' it. Thet's what I allowed to do. It's a cold day when I git left. No thanks to the county. I settle my own scores."

He took an oiled rag from his coat-pocket and carefully cleaned the chamber of his revolver, still gazing at his prostrate foe. Durgy's nerves were trembling from the tension of the late encounter.

"If you'd waited a little longer it's possible I might have settled this score myself," he said, ruefully.

"Or been settled yerself," said the sheriff, grimly. "Jim didn't miss often. Nur I nuther." He stopped and turned the body over carefully. The half-healed scar came beneath his eye. "There! I thought I ought



"I SETTLE MY OWN SCORES"

at least to have barked him the other night. I see I *did*. A little nearer, and I might have been saved my trip this morning." He paused. "And Lou wouldn't hev been a prisoner of war."

Durgy caught at the last sentence. "What have you done with Lou?" he demanded, breathlessly.

"Locked her up in her own bedroom till she gits over the sulks," replied the sheriff, with a chuckle. "I won't stand any nonsense in my women folks. I ain't built that way."

IX

WITH little change in the material fortunes of its inhabitants, two years passed over Lucky Valley. The same prosperity that had made this Eden of the stock-farmer a synonym for success attended the fortunate proprietors. Herds and flocks multiplied, wealth increased, and, in obedience to the laws of economics, capital waited on the efforts of intelligent endeavor with the subservience of the slave of the lamp. The eastward mails were freighted with glowing accounts of the new El Dorado, and hosts of emigrants swelled the population of the fertile valley. Matters were in this flourishing condition, when, in the very heyday of success, fortune put the *coup-de-grace* to prosperity. A sudden famine in the East doubled the price of cattle. Beeves that had been selling at fifteen dollars per head, and dear at that,

rose to thirty dollars in a fortnight. Golden harvests—the result of the patient efforts of the past—were reaped in a day, and the elated owners found themselves raised to affluence.

Experiences befell the casual visitor in Lucky Valley destined thereafter to fill the minds of Eastern friends with awe. Tourists associated with eccentric millionaires in ragged clothes of brown ducking and disreputable cowhide boots, who could each draw their personal checks for hundreds of thousands of dollars. The fortunate owners of these vast resources, after a few days of aimless enjoyment and alcoholic idleness, suddenly finding Othello's occupation gone, reinvested their wealth in cattle, and returned to their former contented labors.

Among these successful favorites of fortune William Durgy was no exception. After a severe apprenticeship to disaster, fatality seemed to stay its hand. When the boom in live-stock came, in common with many others, he sold his ranch, and found his future comfortably provided for. But, although in view of recent events it was clearly a misnomer, his old title of "Jonah" still clung to him. So strong is the force of habit.

Rich as the ranchman now felt himself, he found it, nevertheless, impossible to sever his connection with his surroundings. After a listless pilgrimage in other quarters, during which he found little to amuse or interest, he drifted back again to his old haunts, bought a new range, and building a commodious ranch upon it, established himself as a landed proprietor.

He had changed much with the fleeting months. The broad, athletic shoulders had grown broader, there was a sprinkling of gray in the brown hair, and a vague weariness in the bright eye that the emoluments of wealth did not dispel. But his disposition remained cheerful, and he was as popular as ever with the multitude. They only noticed a certain subdued kindness in his manner, which they did not understand, but which made his perennial good-fellowship more fascinating; while his friends averred that Bill was "lonely," and that all he needed was to "marry and git settled."

Perhaps the only one who really understood Mr. Durgy's condition was the gentleman most interested. Mr. Obadiah Hawkins, indeed, who, it will be remembered, had been so indiscreet as to wager something upon his chief's matrimonial prospects, had pondered the situation deeply, and devoted to it the resources of his very philosophical mind. Realizing that the wager aforesaid had now been outstanding for two weary years, he was irritated by the delay, but still indisposed to "hedge."

"The affections of the heart of woman," he said to himself one day over a meditative pipe, "is something sim'lar to sweet cider, and varies with age. When a gal is in her teens, she's rather sweet and sickenin', liable to evervess, and throw herself away on anybody, apt to physic the feller she gits, and disgust him altogether with herself ez a satisfyin' beverage; but if she hez reasonable luck, and contains herself until the virtues she's got kin ripen, so to speak, she gradually gits

a bead and flavor on her thet discounts champagne. Thet's jest the way in this case. Now Lou Townsend hez improved more in the last two years than any cider I ever see. She 'ain't turned flat, and she hezn't gone sour. She hez jest stayed there in the cottage, alongside o' the old woman and the old man, a-soothin' their declinin' years, and repentin' fur the anxiety she once caused them, and seein' the folly of a young gal. And all the while, although she's pretendin' she ain't lookin' at Bill, and no way thinkin' o' him, she's been jest a-spottin' him and a-sizin' him up through the hull of it. She knows she's several grades finer in p'int and character than when she fust met him, and you let her alone fur knowin' he's been true, and thet this yer probation hez improved him. I'll see thet Rube this afternoon, and I'm thet confident I'm right about it thet dern me if I don't go him double or quits!"

X

For some weeks there had been a slight social flutter in Lucky Valley. Whether owing to a feeling of hospitality engendered by recent prosperity, or a sudden and spasmodic taste for gayety, the year had been notable for many routs and sociables. It was a genial and happy time. Spring had stolen upon nature most delightfully. Hardly were her coy footsteps visible on the hills, when the whole landscape woke



"DURN ME IF I DON'T GO HIM DOUBLE OR QUITS!"

the flowers to welcome her. Early in April the out-lying prairies were carpeted with color. There were sunny hollows in the valleys and warm nooks in the woods where all the perfumes of a parterre coquetted with the senses. Under skies blue as a sapphire the birds went mad with ecstasy, and the air was jubilant

with joy and love-making. Quick to respond to the joyous renewal of life with which all things were eloquent, the young people redoubled their gayety in honor of the season. And so it came about that they planned a mammoth picnic amid the green coverts and shady groves of Wild Cat River, and scented notes of invitation fluttered far and wide, like so many butterflies, over the smiling settlement of Lucky Valley.

Mr. Durgy had not contemplated attending this festivity. Hardly had the project entered the heads of its fair planners, however, when he was beset by a bevy of beauty to honor the occasion with his presence. Miss Celia Myers waylaid the ranchman at church, after an earnest sermon by Parson Blackfoot on the salutary influence of solitude, and impressed upon him how essential to her happiness was the light of his countenance. Miss Bertha Maverick encountered him in town, and told him, with the directness for which she was famous, that she had constructed a hat and gown for this merry-making which was calculated to throw him into an abject attitude of admiration for the rest of the season. Miss Linda Jellycake, Miss Patty Pan, and Miss Sally Ratus all wrote to him to tell him that they were compounding certain frontier delicacies, of which the gentleman was known to be fond, solely and exclusively for his delectation, and in utter disregard of their other admirers. Indeed, it was apparent that the matrimonial prospects of Mr. Durgy had unaccountably brightened in the interval. These considerate missives the

gentleman perused with appreciative regard, but laid aside with a certain disappointment.

In vain he sought among their conventional characters for a certain erratic but well-remembered handwriting. Since that memorable afternoon when she had left him so abruptly he had seen little of Miss Townsend. Possibly in the interval he may have had an occasional glimpse of a face that haunted his dreams and came unbidden to fill with longing his waking hours. But since the tragedy in the wood she had so secluded herself that her former associates seldom mentioned her. Restless with memories of one he could not forget, but dominated by a strange pride that forbade any attempt at renewal of his relations, the slow months dragged by for William Durgy. He never called at the Townsend cottage, although repeatedly urged to do so by the blunt and decided sheriff. That individual seemed to grow more peevish and petulant as age added weight to his infirmities. One day a rumor reached him at the cottage that Mr. Durgy had so far overstepped his custom as to present himself at a local ball and remain until the close of the festivities.

"Bill didn't seem to take no stock in the shindig, though," remarked his informant, Mr. Obadiah Hawkins, who, as we have seen, was a shrewd observer of the world about him. "He looked kinder skeered in the ball-room, and I noticed, although thet thar Berthy Maverick hed a way of waltzin' around him, and kinder stabbin' him with her eye over her pardner's shoulder while the music was playin', she didn't seem

to take no effect onto him. Some allowed thet Bill hed a toothache thet evenin', and others said it was a touch of the dumb ager, fur he did act powerful strange. I ketched him durin' the Virginny shake-down, when everybody was a-laughin' and enjoyin' themselves, a-settin' out on the gallery with his hands in his pockets, a-starin' at the stars. I'd been over to the Round-up celebratin', and I fell over him in the dark.

"'The moon ain't noway full to-night,' says I to him, apologizin'.

"'She can't afford to be; there's too many in the bizness,' says he, ez sarcastic ez ye please, and walkin' off.

"Do you know," said Mr. Hawkins, knocking the ashes out of his pipe on the tire of his wagon wheel, "thet thar speech was so onlike Bill I was sure suth-in' must be plumb wrong with him."

That evening the sheriff, sitting at his own hearthstone and smoking a discontented pipe, delivered himself oracularly to his wife and daughter:

"I allers hev said afore thet young gals nowadays was plumb blind to their opportunities, and more obstinate than government mules gin'rally, but it seems the gals up in the valley hez woke up to the fact thet Bill Durgy ain't to be sneezed at. I heerd to-day thet at the dance over to Rider's Ranch they was three deep 'round him to onct, and thet he didn't set down from the time of the fust quadrille. I learn Berthy Maverick is after him again in all her war paint, and Celia Myers hez also dug up the hatchet.

Some of the boys hev begun to lay bets ez to which will fetch him, and everybody sez it's a last call for Bill. He give out last week somewhar thet he was tired of playin' Patience on a monument to empty benches. The sayin' hez somehow got 'round."

The sheriff cast a quick glance at his daughter, who, apparently oblivious to his reflections, was gazing into the fire, with her chin resting in her hands.

"And to think thet he was clean bereft over our Lou here," returned Mrs. Townsend, a nervous woman, diligently employed in setting the room to rights. She paused, with the sheriff's hat in her hand. "I do hope he won't be fool enough to throw himself away on thet brazen Maverick girl. All years is leap-year to her, and they do say she does more than half the courtin'. Mrs. Brooks says Berthy believes in carryin' the war into Africa, so I wouldn't been noway surprised to hear she *had* eloped with a 'coon, but for thet hussy to ketch Bill Durgy, father, land of love!"

And Mrs. Townsend hooked the sheriff's hat on a neighboring picture with a fierceness that imperilled the felt.

"Ye can't never tell, mother, what a man will do," said the sheriff, with his eyes fixed on his silent daughter. "Bill's been prosperous now for some time along back; he's pop'lar in the valley, and hez considerable pressure bearin' on him. And it's astonishin' how some ornery gals thet don't hold the right keerds kin fetch a man when the right gal somehow don't keep her eye on the game. Men won't stand every-

thin', and there is such a thing as bein' frozen out. And in spite of them facts, you tell me Lou is goin' to refuse the invite to thet thar big picnic! Providence," said the sheriff, gravely, "will certainly never smile on a young woman who throws away chances like thet."

But here "Miss Lou" suddenly raised her eyes from the fire and met those of her sire in protest.

"You take altogether too much for granted, father," said she, reprovingly. "I never said I was not going to this picnic. It's such a large affair, I suppose it will never do to decline; and I was thinking only this afternoon, mother, that if I should put those white feathers on that leghorn hat, and trim up that light bunting a little, perhaps I might naturally not put the other girls' eyes out."

The ghost of a smile flickered an instant about the grim mouth of the sheriff, but he finished his pipe without comment.

The following day he went straight to the barn after breakfast, and saddling his white horse, abruptly departed for the village. As he drew near its outskirts, he suddenly left the trail road, and turning into a well-fenced enclosure, hitched his horse to a post in the dooryard.

The house he was about to enter was a comfortable one, with a high-stooped veranda. A man seated in an easy-chair and leisurely smoking greeted him cordially as he mounted the steps.

"I kem over here this arternoon," said the sheriff, "fur a word or two techin' six-shooters. Does yer find any difficulty with thet new patent Colt?"

"None," returned Durgy, taking his cigar from his lips, and blowing a cloud at an angle that seemed to argue disappointment at the question.

"Throw thet Havanner away, 'Jonah,'" said Townsend, earnestly. "Yer gittin' too elegant fur any use, and besides it's too strong for ye."

He produced a plug of natural leaf, which he tossed to his friend, and took out a pipe already filled with the same article for his own refreshment.

Mr. Durgy, with an air of concentrating his mind on the sheriff's communications, gravely opened his jack-knife and began to cut up the plug.

"I was reckonin' along back to kem over, sit by, and talk of old times," began the sheriff, with unusual softness of manner. "Be you goin' to thet picnic?"

"Nixy," said Durgy, quietly.

"'Fraid of 'jiggers,' perhaps?" said the sheriff, sarcastically. "Ther ain't no 'jiggers' in them woods, Bill!"

"I don't know thet I said anythin' about 'jiggers,'" retorted Mr. Durgy, with a sniff of disdain, as if ignoring that unpleasant and microscopic Texan pest. "But I ain't reckonin' to go, thet's all."

"Lou let on ez much," returned the sheriff, under his breath.

"Eh?" said Durgy, with a start, as if suddenly informed that cattle had depreciated.

"I said Lou allowed you wouldn't come," quietly repeated Townsend, gazing out upon the prairie with eyes that were far away.

The ranchman had filled his pipe. Lighting it

quickly, he took a few eager puffs, as if his nerves hungered for the narcotic, and edged his chair nearer to the sheriff.

"What's *she* going to do?" he said, breathlessly.

"She's goin'."

Mr. Durgy smoked more placidly. "Waal, now, that white hoss of yours does stand it uncommon, pardner!" he remarked, suddenly. "How old is he now?"

"Nine years; they never git no older," Townsend replied, with a quiet wink, but ignoring the digression. "Kin we count on you bein' thar?" inquired the sheriff, pointedly.

"I wouldn't wonder, Joe," said Durgy, in the same quiet tone. "Send me up a biled shirt and a couple of collars when ye go down to the valley."

This the sheriff did.

XI

It was a pleasant morning that ushered in this memorable picnic. The many guests attended in the usual fashion. There were stages for conveying the fair, buggies for certain exclusive couples, and occasional solitary horsemen. These last, from an apparent disposition to smoke in company and furtively eye the ladies, were unanimously voted "women-haters." Of course there were the usual cheerful representatives of the male sex who, though at heart

bored to death by the whole affair, affected to enter eagerly into it, and gathered wood, kindled a fire, got smoke in their eyes, and scalded themselves with the teakettle apparently as a pleasant diversion. There were others, too, who gathered about the table-cloth spread upon the ground, partook of the good cheer while broiling in the sun, ate thankfully in uncomfortable attitudes, held parasols over much-toileted young misses, and laughed and sang and chatted, reckless of the multiform insect and vegetable life which the overarching boughs sprinkled upon the repast, and equally defiant of "jiggers."

Mr. Durgy was not among them. Having partaken of a cup of brackish coffee and sodden cake at the hands of the three Graces who had announced their dyspeptic favors by letter, as I have already stated, he turned his back upon the importunate trio and strolled away under the trees. Cigar in mouth, and yielding to the soothing influences of the wood, with his thumbs in the armholes of his vest, and an American freedom of carriage, he sought a neighboring spring which he remembered.

It was prettily situated. A natural fountain welled up from the heart of a great boulder and oozed over the neighboring rocks with a pleasant sound. Hardly had Durgy stooped to enter the leafy circle by which it was environed when he perceived a young girl standing among the swaying shadows.

She was dressed in a simple white gown that fitted her perfectly, and seemed to enhance the maturity of her figure. A broad leghorn hat, bending in graceful



REMINGTON-

AN AMERICAN FREEDOM OF CARRIAGE

at least to have barked him the other night. I see I *did*. A little nearer, and I might have been saved my trip this morning." He paused. "And Lou wouldn't hev been a prisoner of war."

Durgy caught at the last sentence. "What have you done with Lou?" he demanded, breathlessly.

"Locked her up in her own bedroom till she gits over the sulks," replied the sheriff, with a chuckle. "I won't stand any nonsense in my women folks. I ain't built that way."

IX

WITH little change in the material fortunes of its inhabitants, two years passed over Lucky Valley. The same prosperity that had made this Eden of the stock-farmer a synonym for success attended the fortunate proprietors. Herds and flocks multiplied, wealth increased, and, in obedience to the laws of economics, capital waited on the efforts of intelligent endeavor with the subservience of the slave of the lamp. The eastward mails were freighted with glowing accounts of the new El Dorado, and hosts of emigrants swelled the population of the fertile valley. Matters were in this flourishing condition, when, in the very heyday of success, fortune put the *coup-de-grace* to prosperity. A sudden famine in the East doubled the price of cattle. Beeves that had been selling at fifteen dollars per head, and dear at that,

rose to thirty dollars in a fortnight. Golden harvests—the result of the patient efforts of the past—were reaped in a day, and the elated owners found themselves raised to affluence.

Experiences befell the casual visitor in Lucky Valley destined thereafter to fill the minds of Eastern friends with awe. Tourists associated with eccentric millionaires in ragged clothes of brown ducking and disreputable cowhide boots, who could each draw their personal checks for hundreds of thousands of dollars. The fortunate owners of these vast resources, after a few days of aimless enjoyment and alcoholic idleness, suddenly finding Othello's occupation gone, reinvested their wealth in cattle, and returned to their former contented labors.

Among these successful favorites of fortune William Durgy was no exception. After a severe apprenticeship to disaster, fatality seemed to stay its hand. When the boom in live-stock came, in common with many others, he sold his ranch, and found his future comfortably provided for. But, although in view of recent events it was clearly a misnomer, his old title of "Jonah" still clung to him. So strong is the force of habit.

Rich as the ranchman now felt himself, he found it, nevertheless, impossible to sever his connection with his surroundings. After a listless pilgrimage in other quarters, during which he found little to amuse or interest, he drifted back again to his old haunts, bought a new range, and building a commodious ranch upon it, established himself as a landed proprietor.

He had changed much with the fleeting months. The broad, athletic shoulders had grown broader, there was a sprinkling of gray in the brown hair, and a vague weariness in the bright eye that the emoluments of wealth did not dispel. But his disposition remained cheerful, and he was as popular as ever with the multitude. They only noticed a certain subdued kindness in his manner, which they did not understand, but which made his perennial good-fellowship more fascinating; while his friends averred that Bill was "lonely," and that all he needed was to "marry and git settled."

Perhaps the only one who really understood Mr. Durgy's condition was the gentleman most interested. Mr. Obadiah Hawkins, indeed, who, it will be remembered, had been so indiscreet as to wager something upon his chief's matrimonial prospects, had pondered the situation deeply, and devoted to it the resources of his very philosophical mind. Realizing that the wager aforesaid had now been outstanding for two weary years, he was irritated by the delay, but still indisposed to "hedge."

"The affections of the heart of woman," he said to himself one day over a meditative pipe, "is something sim'lar to sweet cider, and varies with age. When a gal is in her teens, she's rather sweet and sickenin', liable to evervess, and throw herself away on anybody, apt to physic the feller she gits, and disgust him altogether with herself ez a satisfyin' beverage; but if she hez reasonable luck, and contains herself until the virtues she's got kin ripen, so to speak, she gradually gits

a bead and flavor on her thet discounts champagne. Thet's jest the way in this case. Now Lou Townsend hez improved more in the last two years than any cider I ever see. She 'ain't turned flat, and she hezn't gone sour. She hez jest stayed there in the cottage, alongside o' the old woman and the old man, a-soothin' their declinin' years, and repentin' fur the anxiety she once caused them, and seein' the folly of a young gal. And all the while, although she's pretendin' she ain't lookin' at Bill, and no way thinkin' o' him, she's been jest a-spottin' him and a-sizin' him up through the hull of it. She knows she's several grades finer in p'int and character than when she fust met him, and you let her alone fur knowin' he's been true, and thet this yer probation hez improved him. I'll see thet Rube this afternoon, and I'm thet confident I'm right about it thet dern me if I don't go him double or quits!"

X

For some weeks there had been a slight social flutter in Lucky Valley. Whether owing to a feeling of hospitality engendered by recent prosperity, or a sudden and spasmodic taste for gayety, the year had been notable for many routs and sociables. It was a genial and happy time. Spring had stolen upon nature most delightfully. Hardly were her coy footsteps visible on the hills, when the whole landscape woke



"DURN ME IF I DON'T GO HIM DOUBLE OR QUITS!"

the flowers to welcome her. Early in April the outlying prairies were carpeted with color. There were sunny hollows in the valleys and warm nooks in the woods where all the perfumes of a parterre coquetted with the senses. Under skies blue as a sapphire the birds went mad with ecstasy, and the air was jubilant

with joy and love-making. Quick to respond to the joyous renewal of life with which all things were eloquent, the young people redoubled their gayety in honor of the season. And so it came about that they planned a mammoth picnic amid the green coverts and shady groves of Wild Cat River, and scented notes of invitation fluttered far and wide, like so many butterflies, over the smiling settlement of Lucky Valley.

Mr. Durgy had not contemplated attending this festivity. Hardly had the project entered the heads of its fair planners, however, when he was beset by a bevy of beauty to honor the occasion with his presence. Miss Celia Myers waylaid the ranchman at church, after an earnest sermon by Parson Blackfoot on the salutary influence of solitude, and impressed upon him how essential to her happiness was the light of his countenance. Miss Bertha Maverick encountered him in town, and told him, with the directness for which she was famous, that she had constructed a hat and gown for this merry-making which was calculated to throw him into an abject attitude of admiration for the rest of the season. Miss Linda Jellycake, Miss Patty Pan, and Miss Sally Ratus all wrote to him to tell him that they were compounding certain frontier delicacies, of which the gentleman was known to be fond, solely and exclusively for his delectation, and in utter disregard of their other admirers. Indeed, it was apparent that the matrimonial prospects of Mr. Durgy had unaccountably brightened in the interval. These considerate missives the

Some of the boys hev begun to lay bets ez to which will fetch him, and everybody sez it's a last call for Bill. He give out last week somewhar thet he was tired of playin' Patience on a monument to empty benches. The sayin' hez somehow got 'round."

The sheriff cast a quick glance at his daughter, who, apparently oblivious to his reflections, was gazing into the fire, with her chin resting in her hands.

"And to think thet he was clean bereft over our Lou here," returned Mrs. Townsend, a nervous woman, diligently employed in setting the room to rights. She paused, with the sheriff's hat in her hand. "I do hope he won't be fool enough to throw himself away on thet brazen Maverick girl. All years is leap-year to her, and they do say she does more than half the courtin'. Mrs. Brooks says Berthy believes in carryin' the war into Africa, so I wouldn't been noway surprised to hear she *had* eloped with a 'coon, but for thet hussy to ketch Bill Durgy, father, land of love!"

And Mrs. Townsend hooked the sheriff's hat on a neighboring picture with a fierceness that imperilled the felt.

"Ye can't never tell, mother, what a man will do," said the sheriff, with his eyes fixed on his silent daughter. "Bill's been prosperous now for some time along back; he's pop'lar in the valley, and hez considerable pressure bearin' on him. And it's astonishin' how some ornery gals thet don't hold the right keerds kin fetch a man when the right gal somehow don't keep her eye on the game. Men won't stand every-

thin', and there is such a thing as bein' frozen out. And in spite of them facts, you tell me Lou is goin' to refuse the invite to thet thar big picnic! Providence," said the sheriff, gravely, "will certainly never smile on a young woman who throws away chances like thet."

But here "Miss Lou" suddenly raised her eyes from the fire and met those of her sire in protest.

"You take altogether too much for granted, father," said she, reprovingly. "I never said I was not going to this picnic. It's such a large affair, I suppose it will never do to decline; and I was thinking only this afternoon, mother, that if I should put those white feathers on that leghorn hat, and trim up that light bunting a little, perhaps I might naturally not put the other girls' eyes out."

The ghost of a smile flickered an instant about the grim mouth of the sheriff, but he finished his pipe without comment.

The following day he went straight to the barn after breakfast, and saddling his white horse, abruptly departed for the village. As he drew near its outskirts, he suddenly left the trail road, and turning into a well-fenced enclosure, hitched his horse to a post in the dooryard.

The house he was about to enter was a comfortable one, with a high-stooped veranda. A man seated in an easy-chair and leisurely smoking greeted him cordially as he mounted the steps.

"I kem over here this arternoon," said the sheriff, "fur a word or two techin' six-shooters. Does yer find any difficulty with thet new patent Colt?"

"None," returned Durgy, taking his cigar from his lips, and blowing a cloud at an angle that seemed to argue disappointment at the question.

"Throw thet Havanner away, 'Jonah,'" said Townsend, earnestly. "Yer gittin' too elegant fur any use, and besides it's too strong for ye."

He produced a plug of natural leaf, which he tossed to his friend, and took out a pipe already filled with the same article for his own refreshment.

Mr. Durgy, with an air of concentrating his mind on the sheriff's communications, gravely opened his jack-knife and began to cut up the plug.

"I was reckonin' along back to kem over, sit by, and talk of old times," began the sheriff, with unusual softness of manner. "Be you goin' to thet picnic?"

"Nixy," said Durgy, quietly.

"'Fraid of 'jiggers,' perhaps?" said the sheriff, sarcastically. "Ther ain't no 'jiggers' in them woods, Bill!"

"I don't know thet I said anythin' about 'jiggers,'" retorted Mr. Durgy, with a sniff of disdain, as if ignoring that unpleasant and microscopic Texan pest. "But I ain't reckonin' to go, thet's all."

"Lou let on ez much," returned the sheriff, under his breath.

"Eh?" said Durgy, with a start, as if suddenly informed that cattle had depreciated.

"I said Lou allowed you wouldn't come," quietly repeated Townsend, gazing out upon the prairie with eyes that were far away.

The ranchman had filled his pipe. Lighting it

quickly, he took a few eager puffs, as if his nerves hungered for the narcotic, and edged his chair nearer to the sheriff.

"What's *she* going to do?" he said, breathlessly.

"She's goin'."

Mr. Durgy smoked more placidly. "Waal, now, thet white hoss of yours does stand it uncommon, pardner!" he remarked, suddenly. "How old is he now?"

"Nine years; they never git no older," Townsend replied, with a quiet wink, but ignoring the digression. "Kin we count on you bein' thar?" inquired the sheriff, pointedly.

"I wouldn't wonder, Joe," said Durgy, in the same quiet tone. "Send me up a biled shirt and a couple of collars when ye go down to the valley."

This the sheriff did.

XI

It was a pleasant morning that ushered in this memorable picnic. The many guests attended in the usual fashion. There were stages for conveying the fair, buggies for certain exclusive couples, and occasional solitary horsemen. These last, from an apparent disposition to smoke in company and furtively eye the ladies, were unanimously voted "women-haters." Of course there were the usual cheerful representatives of the male sex who, though at heart

bored to death by the whole affair, affected to enter eagerly into it, and gathered wood, kindled a fire, got smoke in their eyes, and scalded themselves with the teakettle apparently as a pleasant diversion. There were others, too, who gathered about the table-cloth spread upon the ground, partook of the good cheer while broiling in the sun, ate thankfully in uncomfortable attitudes, held parasols over much-toileted young misses, and laughed and sang and chatted, reckless of the multiform insect and vegetable life which the overarching boughs sprinkled upon the repast, and equally defiant of "jiggers."

Mr. Durgy was not among them. Having partaken of a cup of brackish coffee and sodden cake at the hands of the three Graces who had announced their dyspeptic favors by letter, as I have already stated, he turned his back upon the importunate trio and strolled away under the trees. Cigar in mouth, and yielding to the soothing influences of the wood, with his thumbs in the armholes of his vest, and an American freedom of carriage, he sought a neighboring spring which he remembered.

It was prettily situated. A natural fountain welled up from the heart of a great boulder and oozed over the neighboring rocks with a pleasant sound. Hardly had Durgy stooped to enter the leafy circle by which it was environed when he perceived a young girl standing among the swaying shadows.

She was dressed in a simple white gown that fitted her perfectly, and seemed to enhance the maturity of her figure. A broad leghorn hat, bending in graceful



REMINGTON-

AN AMERICAN FREEDOM OF CARRIAGE

curves about her face, and surmounted by nodding white ostrich plumes, gave her an added coquetry; and yet at the moment of her discovery coquetry was farthest from her thoughts.

I cannot say that "Miss Lou"—now older by two years than when first met with—had not contemplated this fortunate meeting. She was certainly quite conscious, but she assured the ranchman, with a certain stately and distant manner, that the interruption was "an unexpected pleasure."

Durgy, if in a measure prepared to see her, felt himself suddenly short-breathed and embarrassed. He removed his hat, and in the effort to throw away his cigar flung it into the spring. This awkwardness, though annoying, served to break the ice between them; and as "Miss Lou" laughed merrily, he suddenly stooped, rescued it, and tossed it into the thicket.

"I'm sorry you lost your cigar, Will," said Miss Townsend, becoming suddenly grave. "I hope you haven't forgotten that I used to be fond of tobacco-smoke."

Was it the tone, or was it her calling him "Will," that touched him? It was not five minutes later that he found himself seated at the foot of a spreading tree by the side of Wild Cat River, with a fresh cigar alight, and chatting familiarly of old times in very delightful company.

A breeze stole through the wood and caressed the two while the ranchman pursued his reminiscences. The girl toyed with the ferns and grasses at her feet



"AN UNEXPECTED PLEASURE"

with downcast eyes, and a faint murmur of picnic revelry came to them from a distance.


Really, if you wish to know how this fortunate widower declared himself, you must ask the parties themselves. There were no eavesdroppers—not even a robin or a squirrel—to interrupt them that memorable afternoon. It was rumored afterwards that Celia Myers stated that Lou must have asked Bill herself, and refused to take “No” for an answer, for *she* had certainly found him “powerful sot for a widower.” Miss Maverick gave it out in church that it was the combination of “ostrich feathers and angel-white duds” that settled it. She further remarked sweetly that Bill would find out later that he had caught a “swamp angel.” But I do not know that I am required to disclose these frank criticisms of the unsuccessful. Of one thing I am positive, that Mr. Durgy asked Miss Townsend to sing, and that quite unembarrassedly she lifted a very rich contralto in the green wood. Almost impulsively she chose a song she had learned which during the long months of their separation had appealed to her with a peculiar sympathy. There was in her voice a confession too true to have been spoken, and an appeal which the music made more pathetic. As she sang, the ranchman knew instinctively what had been—what were her thoughts. These were the words:

“So long the day, so dark the way,
Dear heart, before you came,
It seems to me it cannot be
This world is still the same;

For then I stood as in some wood,
And vainly sought for light,
But now day dawns on sunlit lawns,
And life is glad and bright.
Oh, leave me not!
Oh, leave me not!
Dear heart! dear heart!
I did not dream that we should part.
I love but thee;
Oh, love thou me,
And leave, and leave me not.

"With you away, the brightest day,
Dear heart, goes by in vain.
I dare not dream what life would seem
If you ne'er came again.
Dark ways before would darken more;
The world would change to me;
Each sun would set in vain regret
That morning brought not thee.
Oh, leave me not!
Oh, leave me not!
Dear heart! dear heart!
I dare not dream that we should part.
I love but thee;
Oh, love thou me,
And leave, and leave me not."

Was there any help for him under the circumstances? Mr. Durgy thought not. He took the lady at her word, and said, with all the ardor of his first infatuation, that for a matter of two weary years he had simply lived to be able to assure her that leave her he never could. And as, in view of this reassuring statement on the gentleman's part, Miss Townsend



felt no hesitation in intrusting her future to his keeping, I have yet to learn that he ever did.

A month had slipped away, and the happy lovers were now absent in the South on a protracted honeymoon, when an event occurred in Lucky Valley which is yet to be chronicled. This was the collection by Mr. Obadiah Hawkins of the amount of his wager from the cowboy Rube.

A few days after the wedding ceremony he mounted his pony, rode over to see his unfortunate debtor, and told him, with some complacency of mien and the corroborative testimony of the county paper, that it would be necessary for him to liquidate his liability.

"'Hope deferred maketh the heart sick,'" said Obadiah, grimly, "and I'm jest natchally pinin' for that fifty dollars. It's two years you've kep' me waitin' for it," he added, with the air of an indulgent martyr, "but I've a mind to be generous, and won't expect no interest under the circumstances."

The unhappy Rube—a lank, dishevelled cowboy—stared at this, tugged at his boot-straps, hobbled into his tent, and after a few minutes' absence returned with a dilapidated stocking. From the mysterious depths of this receptacle he laboriously doled out, in the mixed coinage of a frontier miser, the amount of the wager, heaved a sigh, and pushed the pile of wealth towards his importunate creditor.

"Quite right, Rube, quite right," said Mr. Hawkins, who had dismounted, gravely witnessed this operation, and speedily transferred the money to his

own capacious pocket. "Any time you feel disposed to resk the rest of them sinkers, I reckon I kin accommodate ye. Mebbe you'd like now to gamble on my own matrimonial prospects? No? Well, after 'Jonah's' luck, I wouldn't swear you'd be safe.



"MEBBE YOU'D LIKE NOW TO GAMBLE ON MY OWN MATRIMONIAL PROSPECTS?"

"It's powerful sing'lar," commented Mr. Hawkins, mounting his pony again, and surveying the abject cowboy from the superiority of his saddle—"it's powerful sing'lar and strange, the stupidity of mankind. Here's the hull county callin' Bill 'Jonah,' al-

lowin' him played out and gener'ly gone to grass, and unly me with savey and sand enough to back him fur a winner.

"I knowed it from the first," he continued, with the general confidence of success. 'Jonah' be durned! He 'ain't no call for thet word. Hez any one seen him hev any hard luck sence he rescued thet other young woman? 'Ain't she changed his fortins and been a lucky star to him? I tell you, Rube, this hull county is plumb off the scent. There was a 'Jonah' in this valley once, but the critter wore petticoats. It was thet thar Mrs. Durgy No. 1, who was enough to make a man strike a heap more snags than Bill ever struck afore she was accommodatin' enough to git cremated."

He paused, and put his head on one side reflectively. "It are certainly so," he said, finally. "Accordin' ez a man marries, his fortins will tally. Afore thet he's a free hoss, without handicaps, and safe to bet on fur any race you want to enter him; but when he gits to takin' on freight, it's mostly a lottery. And with a woman in the saddle there's no safety on account of the jockeyin'. They're jest ez liable to sag back on a thoroughbred ez to give him his head. I reckon, however, that this time Bill hez got both whip and spur, and will do hisself credit.

"Somehow his decidin' to do it," he continued, dubiously, "after flashin' in the pan so long, hez made me myself kinder lonesome and onsettled. I don't mind sayin' thet I feel like makin' a cast, jest for luck, right here in this settlement, fur the subjeck seems

somehow eppydemick. Then, again, I've had many a narrow escape, and it's well to go slow. The Lord only knows what I may have been spared."

A transient gleam shot across his weather-beaten face.

"Thar was thet Lampasas gal, now. Ef I had only succeeded in marryin' her, who kin tell how I'd hev turned out? She might hev made," continued Mr. Hawkins, gazing around dreamily—"she might hev made an Apoller out of me."

He removed his hat, and unconsciously stroked the thin straggling locks on the back of his head that time and that eventful courtship still spared to him. The gesture seemed to awaken an unpleasant memory.

"Hold on!" he ejaculated, suddenly. "I take thet back. I reckon I forgot. Thet Lampasas gal was altogether too familiar at times. P'r'aps it's jest ez well she was called so soon.

"I reckon," he added softly to himself, as he carefully replaced his sombrero over the locality of his former sweetheart's hostilities—"I reckon there *was* a sort o' special providence in thet!"

A ROMANCE OF THE BIG HORN

A ROMANCE OF THE BIG HORN

I

WHEN Thomas Brevoort wrote North, begging his sister Grace to visit him on his ranch in Texas, he threw that charming young woman into an ecstasy of delight. She was, at that time, living with a maiden aunt in the city of New York, and the social gayety of the metropolis was beginning to pall upon her. Besides, it was not at all the sort of life to which she had been accustomed. Her girlhood had been passed at their country-seat—a beautiful estate on the shores of the Hudson—and she had grown up with a love of horses, dogs, and all the environments of a rural home. Bereavements had come early, and with a mutual regret the brother and sister had gone to the city to live. But the change was too sudden to be agreeable; Thomas Brevoort found business irksome, and it was not long before he caught the ranching fever and departed for a wider field. It was a great cross to his sister when he came to go away. But she had followed his trials and successes with all the interest of a sister's loving heart, and meanwhile

had accepted the only life that seemed to be left to her. And it was not so very long before Tom, having the advantage of capital and that luck which is perhaps only rare business tact, had built up quite a home for himself in the great South-west and was the proprietor of a flourishing ranch. He surprised her, one day, by coming back—so tall, broad-shouldered, and tawny-bearded, that she felt herself related to a genuine son of Anak, and introduced him as such to all the coterie of her friends. Perhaps she made too much of the handsome rascal; for Tom had retaliated by carrying on a desperate flirtation with her most intimate friend, and, after a protracted visit, had gone back, taking the lady with him as Mrs. Brevoort. By this event Grace had found herself desolate indeed, and thus it was that her brother's proposal to visit them was hailed with delight.

It happened that matters so shaped themselves as to render the project feasible. Some friends of the Brevoorts were going by steamer to Galveston, and her brother had written her that he would meet her in that city if she could arrange for the rest of her trip. In this way, the difficulties which accompany so lengthy a journey were readily overcome. Fate seemed propitious, and Miss Brevoort felt that the star of her good-fortune shone ever before the prow of the vessel that bore her to Southern seas.

It is not strictly a part of this history to accompany her on that delightful voyage—to record how blue waters bounded ever beneath the good ship's flying keel, while sunny skies leaned over from above, and

all the air grew odorous with spice and balm. To the fair voyager it was a constant panorama of beauty and novelty. And, when she reached Galveston and found that fair Southern city lying by the summer sea basking in tropical warmth, girt with flaming oleanders, and swooning in an atmosphere of fragrance and bloom, her admiration knew no bounds. And here she found Tom to welcome her. So that, in a few days, she was whirled away northward, over broad prairies and savannas that seemed to stretch away interminably into the dim horizon through a landscape overhung with sombre creeping moss, where droves of cattle wandered apparently without hindrance or restraint, until at last the distant frontier station of Ballinger was reached. Thence a long ride over hills and valleys dotted with live-oak and bordered with mesquite brought them to the waters of the Big Horn and the broad and fertile acres of Thomas Brevoort.

Miss Grace had been here now for several weeks, and had grown familiar with the ways and manners of her new life. It seemed to her that she had never known surroundings so enchanting. If there was one thing that pleased her more than another, it was the entire freedom from conventional form and restraint. The boundless ocean of air and space about her brought with it a feeling of rest and peace; and, in the renewed sense of health and vigor which she enjoyed, she began to wonder how she had ever endured the tyranny of brick and pave. Besides, she was with those she knew and loved best. Edith Somers, Tom's

wife, was to her a crown of comfort and the soul of joy. Similar in taste and temperament, they had been all in all to each other, and, whether riding together over the flower-starred prairie or chatting on the broad, sunny veranda, which commanded a vast and beautiful prospect, the hours went lightly on congenial wings.

It will be understood that the scene which Miss Brevoort contemplated was very different from that which had greeted her brother. She was reaping the golden results of patient endeavor. All the hardships that had confronted him—the dreary hand-to-hand fight with Nature and bodily want—she could not know. Nor, with the roof of the comfortable ranch-house above her head and the luxuries of its cultivated garden before her, could she appreciate the weary months of tent-life and the scanty bill of fare that had preceded these. All these details were fresh in the memory of her brother Tom, and had a material effect on his enthusiasm. But, in the society of his sister, who accompanied him everywhere and entered so heartily into his plans and projects, his labors found an additional zest. He was proud, too, of the admiration she excited. Grace had always been an intrepid horsewoman, and there were few finer sights than this blond and graceful young woman putting to his paces a certain fleet black pony with which Tom had presented her. Ever since her arrival she had been the recipient of a sort of idolatry remarkable in a country of chivalrous men. Hops and barbecues had been given in her honor, and her presence had

been the crowning glory of many a round-up. All these demonstrations Grace had accepted becomingly but with outward imperturbability. It was a matter of wonder to Thomas Brevoort to find that they produced upon his sister so little impression; he had been down in the South so long that his impulses and appreciations were Southern.

"Perhaps it's the Northern 'repose' we hear so much about," he said to his wife, in one of their confidential tête-à-têtes.

It was indeed nothing of the sort, and, well as Thomas Brevoort knew his sister Grace, there was one episode in her life of which he had always remained in ignorance: he had never known Jack Harrison, nor how much Grace had grown to think of him. He had never known how, amid the whirl of that giddy social life that had grown so distasteful to her, there had been one face that stood out from the crowd, one heart which had touched in hers a responsive chord. It had all taken place after he had gone away. There had been a few weeks of delightful society, a few hours that lingered still in the young girl's memory with all the fragrance of June roses, and then a cruel misunderstanding, a few harsh words, and all was over. Jack had gone away, too, into the South-west, yielding to the despotism of a foolish pride. Whither he had wandered or how time had gone with him she had never heard; she only realized how colorless and weary had grown the world he left behind; how society seemed a soulless monotone; and how she saw in all gayety the skeleton at the feast.

Perhaps this was not the least of the many reasons that made her present existence so delightful to her. And she hung around the shrine of her shattered memories the bind-weed of regret.

II

THERE was certainly very little trace of this in the serene-faced young woman who reclined in a Manila hammock in a corner of the broad veranda one pleasant morning in April. It was the height of the vernal season; the broad undulating valley stretched away endlessly before her, steeped in the shimmering sunlight, dotted with live-stock, and forming a gratifying panorama of life and color; the air was full of freshly-blown odors and the chorus of birds; mocking-birds, overflowing with melody, frolicked and waned with the breezes; and all the attributes of earth seemed the incarnation of joy.

Miss Grace Brevoort thought so, too, and shaded her eyes against the glittering landscape as she drank in its beauties. She was all alone that morning. Tom and Edith had gone over to Ballinger on business, and, from an impulse that was new to her, Grace had remained behind. She felt meditative and thoughtful, and wanted the opportunity to get by herself and indulge in a retrospective mood. It was a question, perhaps, whether, with the awakening season, the fair

Northerner had not been lately given a good deal to day-dreaming and reverie. Back in the city she had had no opportunity, for the whirl of fashionable gayety had kept her ever on the wing. But here was that delightful leisure and repose where, amid fascinating surroundings, one loves to linger over the bright visions and memories of the past, and all the vanished pleasures of a life start into being as at the wand of a magician.

Miss Brevoort was swinging listlessly to and fro, her thoughts busy with a certain episode of the days gone by, when, attracted by something occurring on the broad expanse of prairie before her, she sprang suddenly to her feet, and, running to the balustrade of the veranda, leaned against a vine-clad pillar of the porch. I have forgotten whether I have described her, and certainly one who had marked the slight and graceful figure reclining in the hammock would have been hardly prepared for the erect and animated beauty of the blond apparition so suddenly revealed. This girl had the gait of a goddess, and, as she swept across the veranda, it was a pleasure to the eye to witness the lithe ease of her every movement. Her hair was as blond as amber, and waved about her temples in the soft breeze that was playing over the valley, while in her eyes was something of the golden haze which seemed to rest upon the landscape she beheld. She had that clear complexion which is only the accompaniment of perfect health, and, when she smiled, it was with a flashing revelation of brilliant teeth that was extremely fascinating.

She was dressed, this morning, in a stylish long black gown which she sometimes wore for a riding-habit, and which fitted her so exquisitely that you caught the superb contour of her figure in all its graceful symmetry. Small wonder, indeed, that the advent of this beautiful and accomplished young woman had caused such a sensation among the eligible bachelors of the frontier, and that they had vied with one another in their efforts to entertain her and to make her stay in the South-west memorable. Nor was this chivalrous attention confined only to the single men. It is said that "Belton Joe," driver of the daily stage between Belton and Lampasas, and a married man, came all the way by cars from his neighborhood, to get a glimpse of the lady's loveliness, and was fain to remark that she was superior to anything that had ever required his professional attentions.

"They's a gal up thar in Big Horn," he was wont to say, "thet kin git away, in looks, with anything thet was ever raised in the South-west. She's ez airy and graceful ez an antelope fawn, with hair ez yellow ez corn-silk, and eyes thet sparkle like a glass o' sherry in the sunlight."

Something was transpiring, just now, on the grassy level in front of the Big Horn Ranch, in which these beautiful eyes were evidently much interested. A horseman had suddenly emerged from the belt of timber that bordered a low divide on the left of the landscape, and was coming across the plain at a head-long gallop. He was mounted upon a chestnut horse that showed evident signs of weariness. The rider,

who was without hat or coat, but who rode magnificently, glanced constantly backward over his shoulder in the direction of the locality he had just quitted. Hardly a second elapsed when another horseman burst from the neighboring cover and came thundering across the valley in hot pursuit of the fugitive. As he rode, he swung about his head a flying lariat, and, in the first few bounds that his gray horse took on emerging from concealment, it was apparent that he was the better mounted. This was evidently perceived by the horseman in advance, for he immediately turned in his stirrups and emptied his revolver at his pursuer as he rode, sending shot after shot behind him with a rapidity that startled the morning stillness and sent ringing echoes down the valley.

The unexpected reports brought Grace to her feet with an excitement that blanched her cheeks and flashed from her eyes. This was the first instance she had seen of hostility upon the frontier, and it had in it a novelty that was at once dangerous and fascinating. The two horses were coming on at full gallop, their rapid evolutions in full view of the startled girl. The man riding the gray had ceased to swing his lariat and was clinging close to the neck of his horse, to avoid, if possible, the marksmanship of his enemy. At each shot from the revolver, Grace could see the charge flash from the muzzle and the smoke gather along the plain.

Suddenly the shots of the revolver were answered by a volley of rifles down the valley, and, turning, Miss Brevoort beheld a mounted squad of men scattered

across the plain directly in the path of the fugitive and apparently waiting to intercept him. At the sound the rider of the chestnut horse threw away his empty pistol and, wheeling about, plied his whip fiercely, coming back upon an angle of his former course. He rose in the stirrups, and urging his jaded animal to the utmost, attempted to escape by a burst of speed up the valley. His pursuer turned also, and once more erect in the saddle, came after him furiously, coiling his lariat as he ran—his gallant gray a thunder-bolt of action against the green horizon-line.

It was indeed a beautiful sight, this mad race for life between these mounted combatants, and Grace Brevoort gazed upon it breathlessly, despite the ringing cheer that burst from the mounted cavalcade and the thunder of flying hoofs that were now apparently joining in the pursuit. The gap between the rival horsemen was rapidly closing up. The gray horse was gaining upon the chestnut with every spring. From where she stood, Grace thought she could almost see the despair and nervousness of the fugitive, as he realized his desperate case. And now the sinuous lariat was swinging again about the head of the pursuer, its coils enlarging at every swing. On a sudden the flying noose left the hand of the rider, and shooting ahead in a long spiral, descended full about the shoulders of the fugitive. Instantly the gray horse checked his speed and braced his fore-feet for the coming recoil. There was a sharp shock, and with a sudden tightening of the rope, the captured man was

plucked violently from his saddle and rolled heavily upon the plain.

The whole scene passed so quickly that it was over before Grace had recovered from her surprise, or indeed had shifted her position. Not until the capture was effected, however, did a sound escape from the combatants. The chase had been too desperate to admit of call or cry. With the fall of his adversary the successful horseman reined up his gray, and waving his broad sombrero about his head, indulged in a shout of triumph that would have done justice to a view-halloo. It was answered by a chorus of cheers from the others in pursuit, and soon there was a cluster of horsemen about the fallen man and a hurried consultation. Meanwhile the captor had dismounted from his horse and loosened the confining lariat. The prisoner had been thrown with great violence, and appeared at first too much injured to rise. The mounted cavalcade appeared to entertain little sympathy for his condition. From where she was standing Grace could hear their excited voices in conversation, and it seemed to her that the majority were in favor of doing him still greater violence. At last the counsel of the horseman who had taken him prisoner seemed to prevail, and she beheld him hand over his captive to the leader of the party, and mounting his horse, ride away over the prairie in the direction from whence he came. The others were not long in following his example. The arms of the prisoner were securely bound behind him, and he was lifted to his feet and placed again in the saddle. A rope was

tied about the neck of his horse, one end of which was given to one of the mounted escort. The rest sprang to their stirrups and were soon in motion, coming in the direction of the ranch-house.

III

THE trail-road across the plains to Ballinger ran by the Big Horn Ranch, and it was along this highway, barely discernible by several faint wagon-tracks, that the cavalcade was approaching. Living thus on a line of communication upon the frontier, Miss Brevoort knew it was quite customary for travellers to stop, by twos and threes, in that hospitable fashion which obtains throughout the South; but for the visit of a score of armed men she was hardly prepared. Accordingly she beat a hasty retreat into the house and sought the security of her bedroom. Knowing the peculiarities of the region, she feared that it might enter into the minds of the majority to stop to dinner, and the thought of entertaining so many warlike strangers at table was more than she could contemplate with composure — if, indeed, there was sufficient provision in the larder for such a host. Her trepidation, however, did not prevent her reconnoitring from the vantage of her bedroom window. Hidden from view by the carefully-drawn curtains, she beheld the armed band approach and draw rein at the rancho gate. They

appeared to be a sheriff's posse—and to her Northern eyes they seemed indeed a motley crew. Dusty and travel-stained, with no distinguishing uniform, their horses jaded and flecked with the foam of hard riding, it was difficult to realize in them a brave and disciplined troop. But, recruited as they were from among the best shots and riders in the State and accustomed to the perils of border warfare, Miss Brevoort knew the record of these regulators of the frontier. Pinioned upon his horse, hatless and coatless, in the centre of the group of horsemen, their captive was readily discernible. He appeared to be a black-browed, evil-faced ruffian, who regarded his present predicament with sullen discomfiture. This did not prevent him, however, from sharing in the refreshment of his captors, who had no sooner halted than they began to recruit their flagging energies from certain tin canteens that were passed from hand to hand. After a long draught from one of these, the ranger who held his confining tether good-naturedly extended his flask to the lips of the prisoner. The latter drank greedily.

"Geewhittaker! Train-wreckin' hain't interfered none with this feller's capacity!" said the ranger, holding up ruefully the empty flask. "Sheriff, toss me over yours. I'm as dry as a potato-bug."

The sheriff, a small man with a nervous manner, who had already dismounted from his horse, did as he was requested, and then called out to his followers in so loud a tone that every word came distinctly to Miss Brevoort:

"I reckon we better tie up here, boys, and wait till the sun gets down a little. Tom Brevoort will give us a bite, and it'll rest the hosses. And, mind ye, no skylarkin', for I hear tell they's a young woman from the North at this ranch."

Grace waited to hear no more. Dropping the window-curtain, she ran through the hall-way, down a back staircase, and thence, by the door of the neighboring kitchen, escaped to the barn at the rear of the house. To be held up as a criterion to the gaze of a score of rude and savage men was more than she contemplated. She preferred that they should find the ranch untenanted, and infer that every one had gone away. For a while she busied herself in feeding Gypsy, her black pony, and in gazing through the barn window at the sun-steeped landscape without and the ever-circling buzzards; then, as the time dragged with her, she began to long for a gallop over the prairie levels. She peered from the barn door to see if the mounted party had gone; she could not tell, for the barn lay directly in the rear of the ranch, and that structure impeded the view. Through the barn gate she could make her exit unnoticed. What was there to prevent her riding away and escaping this unpleasant interruption altogether?

She answered the question by going at once to Gypsy's stall and saddling and bridling that intelligent animal. It was no trick at all for the fair Grace to do this, for she had been used to it before she assumed long dresses. To mount successfully was a more difficult matter; but, catching up a light som-

brero belonging to her brother, she succeeded at last with the aid of a broken chair in climbing into the saddle, and, with a sigh of relief, she gave the rein to her black pony and dashed away. In a few moments she was far out upon the plain.

It was a glorious day, and it seemed to Miss Brevoort that the excursion was in every way as agreeable to her horse as herself, as she went cantering away over the grassy levels, scaring the turtle-doves from their nests amid the dwarf mesquites and frightening many a sleepy jack-rabbit from his form, while the prairie-dogs kept up a shrill insistent clamor from their mounds. Miss Brevoort had learned to appreciate the danger of this pygmy enemy, and was as adroit as Gypsy in avoiding their many burrows. She had ridden long and far, and was beginning to think of returning, when she was suddenly aware that she was almost side by side with an antelope that was bowling along at an easy amble among the scanty timber.

The surprise gave Grace quite a perceptible thrill. Although not unfamiliar with these graceful creatures, she had never before been so near to one. She was so close now that she could readily distinguish its rough piebald coat, almost like fine quills in texture, the singular curvature of its horns, and the beautiful eyes of the animal. From a desire to test its powers of speed, she shook the reins over Gypsy's neck and encouraged him to exert himself. The impetuous little pony was off at once, like a bolt from a cross-bow.

Away they flew in a burst of speed over the grassy plain. For a few moments it seemed to Miss Brevoort that the graceful creature she was pursuing was not so fleet as her horse. She was at times so near to it that she believed she could have reached from the saddle and touched it with her riding-whip, and she could hear the quick, hurried breath of the frightened animal. As they rode along, neck and neck, she began to fancy that the antelope was wounded, and, in the excitement of the chase, she almost wished for a revolver, that she might try her prowess with the weapon. But she had miscalculated the endurance of her quarry, as she soon discovered. It was merely trying, with the perverseness it sometimes exhibits, to cross her course. This it finally succeeded in doing, her horse almost running it down as the fleet and graceful apparition dashed by. Hardly had Miss Brevoort wheeled her horse, when it was fifty yards in advance, and it increased its lead at every spring, bounding away with a velocity it was idle to follow. It soon disappeared in a fringe of timber far down the valley.

Grace realized how well merited were the stories she had heard of the fleetness of the antelope, and checked the rein on her laboring pony. He was completely "blown." She wondered how far she had galloped, and cast her eyes over her shoulder in the direction of the distant ranch-house. To her surprise it was nowhere to be seen. Turn as she would, she could see no trace of it. As far as the eye could reach, the appearance of the valley was the same.

Clumps of mesquite and live-oak stretched before her in tiresome monotony. The undulating billows of prairie rolled away against the dim green horizon—a hopeless, uncharted sea. It came over her suddenly, unanswerably, that she was lost upon that wide expanse of prairie.

IV

Lost upon the prairie! To one acquainted with the great plains of the South-west it would be difficult to exaggerate the terrible calamity that had overtaken Miss Brevoort. But perhaps among civilized men and women no misfortune is so little understood. There are doubtless those who imagine that, to a mounted man, the situation presents few difficulties. This is a fearful mistake. It requires all the skill and experience of a long life upon the plains; and the names of those who have perished in the attempt to escape are legion. To begin with, it is not possible to ride across the open prairie, anywhere, in a straight line, for a distance of ten miles. The chances are that the rider will simply describe a circle. After riding for half a day he will be disheartened by coming back to the point at which he started. And to the bewilderment and despair consequent upon such discouragement, accompanied by the twin enemies, hunger and thirst, the wanderer readily succumbs.

Fancy, then, the plight of our heroine, destitute of

any knowledge of woodcraft by which her situation might be alleviated. She had never learned it was possible to take one's bearings by means of that shifting guide, the sun ; she could not tell the northward side of trees and rocks by those weather-signs that are known to the ranchman ; above all, she did not know that in throwing the reins over the neck of her horse, and in trusting to his dumb sagacity, there was a more probable chance of success than any experiment of her own might attain. Perhaps her very ignorance of her desperate situation sustained her most. She remembered afterwards that when it first dawned upon her that she was lost she did not grow sick or faint with terror. Her senses did not reel, nor did hope die out in her breast. She closed her eyes for a moment, and prayed silently for deliverance in her terrible case. Then, shaking the reins over Gypsy's neck, she rode back in the direction she believed she had come, scanning the horizon at every step, confidently expecting each minute to be rewarded by a sight of the distant ranch.

Vain hope ! Fatal delusion ! The sun was beginning to decline, and found her still riding, searching the vague horizon with staring vision. With the surmounting of each successive prairie billow the next rose beyond — vast, measureless, monotonous. The very silence of the uncultivated waste began to oppress and terrify her. She began to be bewildered and to be haunted by a fear that, with each step, she was going farther and farther out of her course. She grew hungry, and as the discomfort of this grew

upon her, the thought of starvation and her utter helplessness made her almost delirious. But, faint with terror and exhaustion, she struggled on.

It was almost sunset, when, as she mounted a high divide, her horse surprised her by suddenly neighing loudly and making a *détour* to the right. The heart of the wayfarer gave a great bound of joy: they were travelling directly in the path of the sun's rays, and its dying glories steeped her person in rosy warmth. Shading her eyes, she endeavored to discern what had excited her horse. The sound of a distant stock-bell met her ear, and, to her delight, she perceived a small adobe house built amid a clump of live-oaks on a little rise of ground. Several horses, closely hopped, were grazing near by.

With a prayer of thankfulness for what she deemed her deliverance, Miss Brevoort rode hurriedly forward. As she drew near, her arrival elicited no sign of welcome. The horses, indeed, raised their heads and greeted her with a slight whinny, but no answer of recognition came from the house. Somewhat surprised at this she dismounted, tethered her horse by the long rope that hung from her saddle-bow, and turned towards the dwelling. It was as silent as the grave. The rancho door stood wide open, and a lean, dissipated-looking black cat raised itself from the floor where it had been lying, and, stretching itself, came forth to greet her, mewing violently and regarding her with staring yellow eyes. After hesitating a moment, Miss Brevoort stepped within. It was a small apartment, and was evidently the daily habita-

tion of some ranchman. A small cot-bed stood in one corner, and over it, suspended from the wall, hung a pair of antlers, from which depended several coats and other articles of clothing. There was a small rack of books above a toilet-stand. Upon a chair was a brier-wood pipe still full of ashes, where its owner had carelessly laid it down. In a corner were several rifles, guns, and whips.

Miss Brevoort took in these details of the absent occupant's house-keeping in a single sweeping glance. Her eyes wandered away to a closed door at the farther end of the room. Stepping across the apartment, she knocked upon it. No reply. She lifted the latch and peered within.

A table covered with the remains of what seemed the morning's breakfast met her eye. The coffee-pot still rested upon the stove, and in a cupboard near by she could see several loaves of bread. Frontier hospitality is of too unceremonious a character to regard appearances: it is an unwritten law that the traveller shall stop and refresh himself at any dwelling along his route. But, had the circumstances been different, it is doubtful if Grace could have withstood the temptation to dine. She had ridden since early morning, and during that interval had not tasted a mouthful of food. She was almost famished, and she at once sat down and satisfied the cravings of her appetite. If the fare was cold, she certainly found it palatable, and the black coffee did much to recruit her strength after the fatigue of her journey. Having supped, she repaired to the adjoining room and

confronted her singular situation. She was in hourly expectation of the proprietor's return. She reflected with natural perplexity upon the explanation she must give of her position, and the manner in which this explanation would be received.

Her loneliness was enough to provoke a shudder, and yet she did not know how soon the presence of humanity might place her in greater danger. It would seem, however, that her fears were groundless; the hours went slowly by, but she was unmolested. Midnight found her in undisputed possession of the ranch. Once or twice in the interval she had thought she heard the sound of voices, and boldly throwing open the door, had awaited, with an assumption of courage she did not feel, the expected arrival. At last, worn out with waiting and the fatigue of the day, she lay down upon the little cot and drew about her shoulders an old buffalo-robe that lay upon the foot of the bed. For a time she lay listening in the darkness to the lonely hooting of an owl upon a neighboring divide. This ceased presently, and she fell into a heavy sleep.

V

GRACE BREVOORT awoke in an agony of excitement and terror: the earth was shaking with a strong vibratory tremor, and she could feel the small adobe house thrill and quiver with the rush of some mighty object without that went shrieking through the darkness and dying away down the wind. In the sudden recall to consciousness, Miss Brevoort could not at first remember her surroundings; and it was only when she heard a long, wailing whistle down the valley that she realized it must have been the passage of a night express that had caused her sudden alarm. Evidently, then, the ranch was near a railroad, and she had an additional opportunity of return. She was so overjoyed by this reflection that she turned again upon her pillow and was soon asleep.

It was early dawn when Grace opened her eyes; the first lances of the sun were piercing the small window of the ranch and shattering themselves upon the rough wall above her head. Fearful of being surprised in her recumbent attitude, she arose and made a hasty toilet with the scant utensils the ranch afforded. Then, passing into the kitchen, she inspected the larder narrowly, to see what were the prospects for breakfast. She was rewarded by the discovery of some eggs, a side of bacon, and some canned goods in

a small cupboard. She busied herself in building a fire in the stove, boiling some coffee, and cooking breakfast. This she ate in solitary loneliness, attended only by the black cat, which purred loudly like some mad thing and sat on a bench by her side during the progress of the meal. After breakfast, from a sense of neatness she could not explain, the young girl washed the dishes and bestirred herself in tidying up the room. It must have been ten o'clock when, in some alarm at the solitariness of the place, she put on her hat and went outside to reconnoitre.

No one was in sight, and, after watering her horse at a small pool near the ranch, Grace tethered him anew and returned to the house. Her situation now began to give her the gravest uneasiness. She pictured to herself the alarm of Tom and Edith upon their return, and the unexplained mystery of her absence. What would they think and what would they do? How long would it be before the owner of the ranch would return? And ought she not, under the circumstances, to saddle her horse and make a second attempt to find her way back? She was pondering all this in her mind with increasing perplexity, when a sudden noise at the door startled her. She sprang to her feet—a horseman had ridden up to the very door-way of the ranch and was about to dismount. Miss Brevoort recognized at a glance the gray horse that had figured in the incidents of the day before, and the trappings and habiliments of his rider. The horseman had a strong, well-developed figure. The lower part of his face was hidden by a light-colored beard,

and his cheeks were tanned to the very eyelids with exposure ; but something in his expression made Grace fix upon him an eager and steadfast gaze. She gasped for breath. She was surely dreaming. It could not be—yes, it was ; it was unmistakably Jack Harrison.

The sudden surprise of this meeting was so overpowering that, for a few seconds, Grace was deprived of power to move or speak ; she stood rooted to the floor, just as she had arisen, the rich blood crimsoning her face and neck, one long blond tress escaping from its confinement and falling upon her shoulder. The horseman, already apprised that he had a visitor from the presence of the strange horse outside, came leisurely towards the ranch-house and in at the open door without removing his hat. When he perceived that it was a lady he suddenly doffed this, disclosing a frank, manly face and a pair of critical eyes that were now widely distended, in the completeness of his astonishment.

"Miss Brevoort !" he gasped. "How came you here ?"

The hat dropped from his hand in his embarrassment.

The sound of his voice, richer and stronger than of old, thrilled through Grace with all the memories of the past ; but his manner of address brought with it a strange chill. He had called her "Miss Brevoort." In the brief interval since she had first recognized him, it had flashed through her mind that their greeting, after so long a period and under such remarkable circumstances, would be as familiar as of old, and, ac-

companying her bewilderment, there had been a spasm of joy. She felt instinctively her mistake.

"I was out riding," she faltered, "and I lost my way. I am stopping with my brother at the Big Horn Ranch."

"In Texas? Lost?" Harrison repeated, absently. He gazed about him vacantly, like one in a dream. "You have been here long?"

"Ever since last night," Grace returned.

"Impossible!" he exclaimed.

His eye wandered a moment over the little room and the poverty of its furnishings. Then his old pride asserted itself.

"I trust you were partially comfortable," he said. "This frontier life of ours is a hard one. The country is, just at present, full of road-agents and train-wreckers, and, living so near the line of the railroad, I have given little attention to the place. I did not return last night as I was detained by an imperative matter. I regret that I had so little to offer you."

"I have been very comfortable, I am sure," Grace rejoined, quietly. She had, in a measure, recovered her composure. "If now you can assist me to return to my people, there will be little to be desired."

"I will do so with pleasure, Miss Brevoort," Harrison returned, with grave courtesy. "I am annoyed at the thought of your having been exposed to such danger. Are you aware, pray, of the condition of the country? How did you dare to risk so much?"

"It was quite an accident," Grace replied, carelessly. "I have my own folly to thank for it, I suppose.

You see," she added, smiling, "I had been here so long that I felt like a native and presumed upon it. But, judging from what I witnessed yesterday from the veranda, I am fortunate in having so skilful a protector."

Jack Harrison colored a trifle under the admiring glance of her amber eyes.

"I have quite fallen in with the ways of the country, and count myself a true frontiersman," he replied, modestly. "But I was very fortunate yesterday. That fellow was the most notorious road-agent and train-wrecker in the country, and had given the authorities no end of trouble—myself included. However," he added, "I fear that the capture all went for nothing, for I learned last night that he had made his escape. It was that which detained me."

"Is it possible?" Grace exclaimed, involuntarily.

"It certainly is," her companion rejoined, "and it is that which makes me anxious for your own welfare. Granted that you were lucky enough yesterday to escape without attack, you might not be so fortunate again. Do you not think, now that you are here, it would be better to return as far as Ballinger by rail? We can hire a conveyance from that station to the Big Horn."

"That," replied Miss Brevoort, "is, of course, as you decide." She smiled graciously upon him. "I am in your hands—Jack." She could not bring herself to the formality of calling him Mr. Harrison.

They were standing at the door of the kitchen when she surprised him with this reference to old times.

The color mounted to Harrison's face in an instant. He had stooped and picked up the water-pail, as if about to start for the spring. His embarrassment was so great that he trembled.

"I must leave you for a moment," he said, hurriedly. "You must be hungry, after such primitive hospitality. I trust you can entertain yourself while I see about dinner."

With a half-bow, he passed out into the sunlight and disappeared around an angle of the house.

VI

LEFT to herself, the past, with all the irony of its associations and memories, came thronging upon Grace, and she sank into a chair with a plaintive little sigh. This man who had just left her was Jack Harrison—Jack Harrison! Could she realize it? She told herself the fact over and over again, putting both hands to her temples and staring before her in a confused way. How the ghost of their past love mocked her in this formal exchange of greetings and common-places! And what an eternity it seemed since they had dreamed that old dream over together. Ah! they had been so happy! And now she had lost him—she had lost him, to find him cold, impassive, apologetic, with no trace of his old feeling but his embarrassment, and, she half thought, a possible regret at the meeting. Oh! it was cruel—cruel!

A sudden report of fire-arms drowned these reflections and drove the blood in ice-currents to her heart. What had happened? She sprang to her feet and rushed to the door wildly. She could see nothing. The landscape without lay calm and unruffled beneath a summer's sun; a prairie-dog barked shrilly from his burrow; the fleeting shadow of a buzzard's wing, projected from the blue vault above, drifted lazily over the valley. She was about to put on her hat and rush from the doorway, when she heard a hurried footstep close at hand, and Jack Harrison staggered across the threshold, closing the door violently behind him.

He leaned against it, struggling for breath, and, with his right hand, endeavored to slide into place the heavy bar that fastened it. His left arm hung helpless by his side. The startled Grace saw that a stream of blood was running down his sleeve and trickling upon the bare floor.

"Help me!" he gasped. "They've hit me!"

In an instant the courageous girl was at his side. With their united exertions the bar was quickly slid into place. Then she turned and faced him.

"Jack—dear Jack!" she cried, making a dumb appeal in the direction of his wounded arm, "tell me—tell me what has happened!"

He did not at first reply. He made a helpless movement towards the corner where his rifles stood, grasped one of them, and endeavored to load it. The effort was too much for him. A spasm of pain crossed his pale face. He set the heavy arm down upon the floor and turned to the terrified girl.

"Grace," he said, "it is useless to conceal it; we are surrounded by our enemies, and are prisoners in this house. Our only hope is to make a fight for it. The man I captured yesterday is outside. He is in company with three others; they are mounted and well armed; they fired on me suddenly when I went to the spring. Tell me; can you load a rifle or pistol? Do you know anything of fire-arms?"

The light of a strong resolution shone in the girl's face and flashed in her eyes. She turned to him with white lips.

"I think so," she said. "But, Jack, dear boy, you must not think of that now. You are wounded—you may bleed to death. Let me bandage your arm."

Jack Harrison set his teeth together. "Not till the arms are loaded," he said, firmly. "It is a mere scratch; I can wait."

He winced with pain as he spoke. "My revolvers are in those holsters—there! hand them to me. Thank God! they are loaded."

Miss Brevoort took down the heavy belt from the hook where it hung on the wall, and laid it on the toilet-stand close at hand. Jack drew a revolver from its holster; he took his position near the single window of the ranch.

"Now," he said, "the rifle-cartridges are in a box, near the cupboard, in the kitchen. You must find them if you can. I will mount guard here till you get back; these rascals may try to break in at any moment. Quick! Keep away from the kitchen window, and be as careful as you can."

The girl flew on her unfamiliar errand. In a few moments she returned with the box of cartridges in her hands.

"Good!" Jack exclaimed. "Now, the Winchester!"

She caught up the rifle from its place in the corner, and, taking a handful of cartridges from the box, filled the magazine with a deft ease that surprised him. Grace had always felt an interest in fire-arms, and the knowledge she had gained while assisting her brother Tom now stood her in good stead. In spite of the peril of their surroundings, Harrison could scarcely repress a word of admiration.

"You are a treasure indeed!" he said.

He made an effort to loosen his coat, and the girl stepped forward quickly to aid him. A sudden shadow, darkening the window, fell upon them both. Harrison looked up. A fierce face, framed in a bristling black beard, was just drawing away from the window. The bright glare without dazzled the eyes of the intruder, and it was evident from his expression that he had not been able to distinguish objects within the room. As he disappeared from view his hand fell away from the window-sash where he had been striving to force the fastening.

At the same time a violent blow was struck upon the door outside, causing it to leap upon its hinges. Miss Brevoort clasped her hands in terror.

"Come, come! Open up here!" shouted a gruff voice, with an oath.

For answer, Harrison grasped his six-shooter and

stole to the window. From his point of view, he could just see the shoulder of his enemy. The sash and pane stood between them, but his assailant was not three feet away. A blinding flash lit up the room for an instant; there was a jingling of broken glass; and the man staggered back with a low curse. The smoke of the discharge poured through the opening.

There was a shuffling of feet without, and a hurried stampede. A moment later they heard the shouts of the robbers, calling to one another, and then the neighing of their steeds. Grace breathed a sigh of relief.

"They have taken to their horses!" cried Jack, joyfully, "but I reckon there is one less to deal with."

He seated himself in a chair and closed his eyes involuntarily, as if in intense pain. He had grown strangely pale in the interval.

"My arm!" he groaned. "I fear, Grace, I am hurt more than I supposed."

He drew from the pocket of his coat a flask which his trembling fingers with difficulty placed upon the table. Miss Brevoort hurried to his side. She hastily poured out a portion of the spirits into a tin cup which stood near, and held it to his lips.

"Drink!" she said; "it will revive you."

Harrison feebly swallowed the liquor.

"You must take off your coat, Jack," Grace entreated. "Your wound must be bandaged."

Even amid her extreme peril, the love she felt for the wounded man eclipsed all personal considerations. The fearful thought of anything serious happening to him made her faint, but not from horror at the fate

which might be hers, exposed to the remorselessness of their foes. In the unselfishness of her solicitude she did not think of that.

• At this moment there was a volley of rifle-shots from without. They could hear the crash of the bullets as they struck the sides of the house, and a few pieces of plastering fell from the wall.

Harrison opened his eyes.

"They're firing at us from their horses," he said; "but I think the walls are stout enough to turn a bullet. Thank Heaven, there is but one window to the ranch!"

Grace put an arm tenderly about him, and gently slipped his coat from his shoulders. The sleeve of his hunting-shirt was drenched with blood. She trembled and turned faint, but the anxiety she felt held her to her task. Summoning all her courage, she stripped back the sleeve quickly and examined the injury. The wound was a deep one, but it was in the fleshy part of the arm, and she believed that the bone was not broken. Could she but stanch the blood, it might not prove serious. She glanced around for something to use as a bandage. Her eye fell upon an old quilt, through which in places the cotton filling protruded. Hastily plucking out several pieces of this, she applied them tenderly to the wound.

But she had nothing with which to bind them in place, and she was in perplexity. A sudden thought occurred to her. With a quick energy, she tore a portion of her skirt into strips, and, applying this to the cotton bats with a skill she did not know she pos-

sessed, she secured them tightly and firmly. In her accomplishment of this task she exerted a nervous strength which surprised her, and made Harrison writhe with agony.

It had grown strangely still in the last few moments. There had been no firing, no indication of the presence of their enemies. The silence struck Harrison as ominous. Keeping close in the cover of the wall, he reconnoitred through the broken pane. The staring sunlight shone vividly upon everything without, but no human presence was visible.

He bethought himself of a simple subterfuge. Resting the barrel of his Winchester upon the back of a chair, so as to command the opening, he crouched behind it, and directed Grace to place his hat upon the muzzle of the other gun and hold it so as to be visible at the window.

The ruse was successful. A running fire of bullets greeted its appearance, one or two of which struck the wood-work of the window. During this fusillade, Harrison kept up a most vigilant lookout through the opening. As he expected, he was rewarded with a sight of the enemy. In his anxiety to obtain a good view-point, one of the robbers, mounted upon a bay horse, rode out into the open, and Harrison glimpsed him through the broken pane. Dropping his eye to the peep-sight of his rifle he pulled the trigger. The man reeled in his saddle at the discharge of the piece, and disappeared from view amid the smoke. A second later he saw a riderless horse with leaping stirrups dash past the window. His aim had been good.

But Harrison could not divest himself of a vague dread which possessed him, and of which he made no mention to Grace. After the ruse of the hat there was no more firing, and a second recourse to the expedient had produced no result. What did it mean—this silence on the part of their assailants? Of their number, two were now manifestly either dead or disabled. Could it be that they would give over the assault? From his position he could command but a small view of the space without, and the uncertainty of his surroundings increased his apprehensions. He was not long held in suspense.

A sudden cloud of black smoke, drifting heavily by the window, filled him with new alarms; in the air was the strong pungent smell of something burning. It flashed over Harrison in an instant that the robbers were trying to fire the house. He remembered a pile of cockle-burs, removed from the fleeces of the sheep, that had been carelessly allowed to remain resting against the side of the house. He wondered if these had been used as the nucleus of a bonfire. They would not be readily inflammable, but, once kindled, might smoulder indefinitely, and added to other material, might make their position extremely uncomfortable. The walls of the house were built of adobe and would resist the flames for a time; but the roof was shingled, and, should the fire reach this, they might be encircled in a whirling vortex of flame which would drive them from their shelter at the mercy of their enemies.

Filled with this new and terrible apprehension, he


turned towards Grace. She was seated upon a low stool in the centre of the room, her hands clasped in her lap, her lips parted with the agony of suspense. The terror of the moment had blanched her complexion to the tint of a tea-rose; her great amber eyes were bright with excitement; and the glory of her blond hair had slipped from its confinement, and shone like an aureola about her, as it rippled down over her back and shoulders. She looked so beautiful, as she sat there, that Jack could not bring himself to acquaint her with the new nature of his fears. She had been so brave, so calm, amid all their peril, that his heart stirred within him, and the memory of his early love for this radiant apparition swept over him in one grand wave of feeling. What mattered it—the foolish misunderstanding, the trivial jealousy of a by-gone year that had estranged them? Perhaps these few fleeting moments were the last that both should live. He arose, and drawing near to her, cast one arm tenderly about her.

The girl crept closer to him in the darkening room. A few sparks amid the eddying smoke flew by the window. They could hear the roar and crackle of the flames without. He felt a tremor as of fear pass over her; the beautiful golden head fell upon his shoulder.

“Does your wound pain you, Jack?”

“Not now,” he whispered.

The chivalrous falsehood made her turn her eyes to him, and he read there the candor of their old confession.




Sweet as the thought was to him, his enjoyment of it was but brief; a whirl of flame flashed suddenly by the window, carrying with it a volume of smoke that poured suffocatingly into the room; tongues of fire leaped to the sash, and soon the panes were framed with climbing color that swept its certain and destructive way to the low roof. Jack seized a half-filled water-bucket that stood near and dashed it over both window and wall.

He was too late. Already they could hear the roaring currents of flame writhing and surging over the eaves. The shingles began to curl and part with the fervent heat, and sparks and burning bits of wood fell like fiery blossoms into the room below. They could distinguish the exulting shouts of their foes. Half stupefied by the blinding smoke, and desperate with the peril of their position, they retreated into a remote corner. Screening the person of Grace with his own body, Jack drew his revolver, determined to make a last stand.

At this moment, above the roar and whirl of the flames, they heard cries and startled exclamations from without. The earth shook as if with the tread of many galloping horses. There were shouts and hoarse voices, mingled with the rattle of fire-arms and the sounds of a sudden strife and confusion, that swept with increasing clamor round the house.

Breathless between hope and fear as to the cause of this sudden tumult, Harrison and Grace remained silent and listening eagerly. The heat scorched them, the blinding smoke stifled them; but, clasped in each



other's arms, they awaited their fate. All at once there was a crash and jingle of glass in the adjoining room; the door of the kitchen was torn open suddenly, and the leader of the robbers—the man Harrison had captured—dashed into the room.

He was evidently closely pursued, for his features wore a hunted expression. His face was bleeding in several places where he had burst his way through the window, and he brandished a cocked revolver in either hand. Facing about, he raised both weapons, just as Harrison brought his own revolver to a level. Grace covered her face with her hands and caught her breath.

The next moment it seemed as if all the batteries of Inferno had been suddenly called into play; from all sides of the room and from the kitchen doorway a succession of blinding flashes crossed and recrossed it with the rapidity of lightning; the air was full of sulphurous vapor and flying splinters; and the walls shook beneath the unearthly din as if with the throes of an earthquake. It ceased as suddenly. Grace had fallen to her knees in the extremity of her terror. Through the smoke that filled the room a tall figure bounded from the kitchen doorway, crossed the room, and raised her to her feet. She opened her eyes, to find the strong arms of her brother Tom about her.

"You are safe? You are unhurt?" he cried.

A sudden gust of wind, sweeping from window to doorway, cleared the room and made objects visible. The leader of the robbers lay prone and ghastly in that uncertain light, his hands still grasping his smok-

ing pistols, where he had fallen. The eyes of Grace ran wildly past him to another object that lay upon the floor. In an instant she had torn herself from Tom's embrace and thrown herself beside it.

"Jack, darling, speak to me!" she moaned.

Thomas Brevoort stooped down beside the kneeling figure and himself examined the prostrate man. At length he raised his eyes to the imploring face of his sister.

"Do not worry, Grace," he said; "I think he has simply fainted from exhaustion."

Thomas Brevoort was right in his opinion; but it was many days before Jack Harrison was himself again. An hour later, when he first recovered consciousness, it was to find himself in a covered wagon, proceeding he knew not whither, but under the armed escort of Sheriff Mosely and Thomas Brevoort. For a few moments he lay quite still, oppressed by a dull throbbing in his temples and a feeling of fever in his veins. He stared helplessly about him in the dim twilight of the vehicle. Then he attempted to rise. A familiar figure seated beside him lifted a warning finger, and a voice, which even in his enfeebled condition thrilled him with a sweetness ineffable, lulled him to repose. He sank back again, and knew no more.

And so, through weary weeks that seemed endless in their succession of pain and suffering, he was sustained and soothed. Of his illness he had never a

clear impression, and surrounding objects seemed to change about him with the bewildering perversity of a dream. He had a glimpse of himself lying upon a broad porch, surrounded by climbing vines and verdure, patiently awaiting the arrival of somebody who gave him greater agony than before. Then the scene changed mysteriously to a spacious room; pictures were on the walls; books and flowers were round about him; but ever beside him was the same sweet presence, brooding over him, anticipating his slightest wants, until, in his weakness and delirium, he came to regard it as a ministering angel that watched beside his bed.

And, indeed, if sympathy and self-sacrifice are celestial characteristics, the comparison was not greatly forced. Grace never realized how the days went by, nor where the hours fled. Sustained by a devotion that defied fatigue, she gave herself no rest, and knew no comfort save that of the invalid. In her absorbed state of mind, the particulars of the search and rescue, so often repeated by her brother Tom, were hardly heeded. She only gathered, in a vague way, that the sheriff had happened to observe her on her lonely ride when she had first started in pursuit of the antelope; that the escape of his prisoner and the consequent pursuit had thrown Mosely and Brevoort together; and that the discovery of her horse in the neighborhood of the cabin had led to a surmise of the real state of facts.

Neither did the anxiety that consumed her permit her to appreciate the puzzled bewilderment of her

brother when he saw her thus suddenly transformed into a professional nurse. To a man like Thomas Brevoort, who had always been in total ignorance of this hidden romance in the life of his sister, the change in her was a complete mystery. It was Mrs. Brevoort who first enlightened him. The latter had been the friend and confidante of Grace, and she took it upon herself to acquaint her husband with the true state of affairs. His amazement was complete; but, after several interviews with his wife on this most serious of topics, he was fain to develop an exaggerated interest in Grace, and to indulge, after the manner of guardian brothers, in mischievous criticism of her attentions. This attitude on his part, however, was met by an annoyance so pathetic that the good fellow, out of sheer sympathy, desisted.

So the days came and went, until the girl's patient care was rewarded, and the man so nursed and tended came forth again into the warm air and sunshine. It was a glorious afternoon, and brother and sister were seated together on the broad porch—the latter still following with caressing eyes the figure of the convalescent, who, rejoicing in his new-found liberty, was strolling about the grounds.

"So you've finally decided to come round to my view and not return North," said Tom, suddenly; he had been gravely regarding Grace.

"Who told you that, pray?" inquired his sister, with a sudden flush.

"Oh! it's all decided," Tom returned, laughing. "Don't try any of your mysteries on me, my dear.

The idea of your keeping this thing away from me so long! I haven't quite forgiven you yet. Jack told me everything last night, and we sat up and smoked cigars over the situation until the small hours of the morning. Permit me to congratulate the future Mrs. Harrison, and cheerfully extend my fraternal blessing. Perhaps you will be interested to know that I have a very high opinion of your beloved. At any rate, we've shaken hands on the matter, and decided, under the circumstances, to join ranches."



A DAPHNE OF THE FOOT-HILLS

A DAPHNE OF THE FOOT-HILLS

I

WHERE the foot-hills of Greytown slope to the high-road there is a wild and tangled chaparral that borders a quiet pond. Above, the cliffy heights seem to mock the crimson and amber of the sunsets, and send weird shadows to dance and beckon in the vale below. When the moon rises, the gray Spanish-moss that festoons every live-oak and pecan in the vicinity of the water sways sylph-like in the wind, and adds its silvern mysteries to the general enchantment. Even at high noon the spot has its fascination. A delightful coolness lingers beneath its shady canopies, and delicate odors drowse in its twilight aisles. Blue lupins and wild verbenas hold the air breathless. Sometimes the antlered head of a deer is glimpsed for an instant in its dim vistas, or the startled note of a wild turkey, calling its comrades, wakes its woodland echoes. And in the spring-time, at all hours, mocking-birds cleave its inner recesses, make love and wanton in the sunbeams, or, mad with moonlight and melody, fill the air with their wild epithalamia.

Late one afternoon in April, Mr. Isaac Mosely, sheriff of Oskalo, foot-sore and weary with his journey over the hills, came suddenly upon this sylvan bower. As he plunged down the declivity and into the chaparral at its foot, the dim twilight at first blinded him. Breathless with haste and fatigue, he threw himself on the soft turf until his eyes should become used to their surroundings. Afar a faint sound, as of a girl singing, pulsed through the stillness. He listened. Gradually objects began to take shape in the obscurity. He perceived that, while the way on either side of him was impassable from the thick growth of cat's-claw and underbrush, a natural pathway, like a narrow avenue, led before him among the tree trunks. Here and there a pencil of rays from the declining sun shot through the shadow. He sniffed the air eagerly, thinking he detected the smell of smoke, and his consequent proximity to some dwelling. Suddenly he sat up abruptly.

Something was certainly moving among the trees some distance ahead of him. In the half-light of the interior, Mosely thought it a girl, but, if so, she was bareheaded, and so fantastically arrayed that indecision as to sex was pardonable. There was a grace and litheness of movement about the figure that suggested the gentler sex—a resemblance that was counteracted by its swiftness and celerity of step. A small animal with arched back and pointed ears lumbered along before her, stopping at every turn to examine the earth curiously. It was like a miniature bear in its movements. The sheriff sprang suddenly to his

feet and called after the retreating figure. At the sound it halted, cast a brief, startled glance behind it, and at once dashed away among the tree trunks with the speed of a frightened fawn. The animal, which had also stopped, started after with frantic leaps. The sheriff threw aside the pack which encumbered his shoulders, and joined at the top of his speed in the pursuit. As he ran he realized at once that the figure he pursued was fleet of foot, and unquestionably a woman. He had taken but a few steps when he passed a ribbon caught on a thorny bush. He tore it from its fastening as he bounded by. He could hear the figure running ahead of him, and as he burst through a small clump of underbrush he caught sight of a fluttering skirt just vanishing among the shadowy trunks beyond. He called again, but apparently only with the result of increasing the speed of the fugitive. Catching his breath, he sprang across the opening and into a dim covert, but was almost instantly hurled to the ground by violent collision with a neighboring tree trunk. His smitten hands carried down with him in his fall a portion of the bark.

For some moments Mosely lay bruised and stunned at the foot of the tree. He was quite out of breath, and to add to his chagrin his face was bleeding. He put up his hand and found that blood was slowly trickling from a small scalp wound, and imperiling his blond hair and beard. As he withdrew his hand it struck with some force against the adjacent tree trunk. The blow sounded hollow, although it barked his knuckles. What was that? Surely he

heard from the depths of the interior a smothered laugh. With a mystified sense of discomfiture he staggered to his feet and leaned against the tree. His attention was attracted to the piece of bark which he still held clutched in his fingers. He examined it attentively. His mind reverted to an ancient legend among the desultory reading of his boyhood—Apollo's futile pursuit of the wood nymph Daphne. He laughed aloud at the thought, and involuntarily thrust the scrap of bark in the bosom of his shirt. Barring the blood and grime of his mishap, Apollo himself might have smiled at the analogy. At this moment he heard a harsh rattling against the bark of the tree, and immediately after was startled by a strange animal that collided with him and ran swiftly up the trunk. It came to a halt in a near crotch. Mosely stepped back and scrutinized it keenly. It was a tame raccoon.

There was something so whimsical in the appearance of the creature that the sheriff regarded it with interest. Its mischievous eyes stared intently at the intruder, and it kept up a peculiar cat-like motion with its claws as it crouched upon the limb, and alternately moved backward and forward in its excitement. With its erect, fox-like ears, sharp muzzle, and ringed tail, it was altogether so droll an object that Mosely was instantly filled with a desire to dislodge it. He stooped and picked up a fragment of bark. He was about to throw this, when he noticed that a small chain which depended from a collar upon the animal's neck had become caught about the limb, and proba-

bly accounted for the eccentricity of its movements. Stepping at once upon a gnarled root of the giant tree, he with some difficulty disentangled this. Then by dint of force and coaxing he finally succeeded in dragging the reluctant animal from its perch. The 'coon resisted with sprawling limbs and a peevish growl that delighted Mosely.

Once safe upon terra firma, the animal became so suddenly frisky and demonstrative that its captor was fain to hurry with it to some distance until it should cease from its gambols. It did not do so until, tugging violently at its chain, it had withdrawn him into a neighboring thicket. Here the cause of its haste was instantly apparent. A tall bee tree, which had been despoiled of its store of sweets with evident labor, revealed the origin of the smoke which he had noticed on first entering the chaparral. A fire still smouldered at the foot of the tree, and the blackened shaft and buzzing of a few angry bees showed the means employed in the recent robbery. A number of honey-combs, rudely torn from the wild hive, still littered the ground. The 'coon eagerly attacked the nearest of these, smearing face and muzzle with the liquid honey. Mosely stooped and patted the head of the greedy rascal. He ran his fingers through the long fur of its neck, revealing the hidden collar. It was garnished with a silver plate. The inscription was barely perceptible in that dim light—"Tommy Dodd." The sheriff smiled as he reflected that this was possibly the youngest member of a family of Dodds living in the neighborhood.

The thought caused him to turn and peer through the thicket. He was just in time to see the young woman who had eluded him step stealthily from the side of the tree he had just quitted. The sheriff gave a sudden start of surprise and recognition. He caught a glimpse of a slight but graceful figure standing still for an instant in a sunlit opening of the woods, with one softly-curved arm lifted to avert the dazzling rays of the setting sun. Her abundant brown hair, escaping from its simple Grecian knot, tossed on her supple shoulders. She gazed curiously about her, and then sprang suddenly into the woods. So fleet was the apparition she might have been some dryad of the grove. With a strange thrill in his pulses, Mosely slowly retraced his steps, dragging behind him the reluctant 'coon. "I might have called Edith again," he muttered; "but, if I had, it's ten to one she'd have stampeded. I reckon she don't recognize me in this get-up." With this reflection he reached the tree. A strip of hanging bark rudely torn aside from a wide opening in the hollow trunk revealed the cause of his former discomfiture. Breathless between awe and admiration, the sheriff stooped and gazed within. The dim interior was half filled with Spanish-moss, and was still redolent of its late occupant. A vague spicy perfume hung in the air that thrilled him and set his heart to beating. A few dog-eared, paper-covered novels, and a broken hand-mirror, thrown carelessly in a corner, seemed to indicate that this was no chance retreat of its owner. Yielding to the subtle influence that filled him, the young man squeezed

himself through the aperture, and flung himself upon the soft mosses with a half-articulate sigh.

II

THE moon was high over Lone Mountain when Miss Edith Fenton reached home, flushed and panting, from her late adventure in the woods. Not being altogether certain what welcome she would receive from the elder Fenton, whose temper, like that of most disobeyed fathers, was erratic and uncertain, she lingered for a moment before entering the paternal dwelling. Its pretty outline and pretentious elegance were enhanced in the gracious moonlight. But the heavy tread of her father, and the ominous slamming of a door within, curbed her æsthetic considerations for the nonce, and she slipped into the shadow of its many gables, and retreating to an entrance in the rear, vanished from view. Removing her shoes in the hallway with a nervous haste that imperilled the buttons, the young lady ran softly up a short stairway, and reached in safety the security of her own bedroom. Here, without further ceremony, she straightway began to disrobe, and then, evidently embarrassed by the obtrusive moon, suddenly desisted, and with a panic of dishevelled tresses and dimpled shoulders, dashed across the apartment and drew the white curtains together. But here she was apparent-

ly held in breathless fascination by the beauty of the landscape without.

The broad valley lay as if stricken mute in the light of the ivory moon. The outlines of trees, bushes, grazing cattle, and the circumambient hills were revealed with the distinctness of day. Across this picture the shadows of drifting clouds trailed with a tremulous play of light and shade. It was undeniably a lovely night, but Miss Edith was not too alive to its loveliness to fail to notice a small, erect figure leaning against a neighboring live-oak, and gazing up at her window with rapt devotion.

Miss Fenton was used to admiration of a very frank and demonstrative kind, but there was something in this moonlight madness which was romantic and touching. Nothing but her dishabille at the moment prevented her recognition of it. She at first thought of dressing again, but after a glance at her relinquished attire, and a recollection of her indignant parent below, she abandoned the idea. With a heightened color and a delicious womanly sense of her own fascinations, she stole away from the window—a mere lissome shadow in that dim light—and sank upon a chair before her mirror, resting her elbows upon the bureau-cover. The envious moon slipped through the suddenly parted curtains, and bathed in mellow radiance the soft curves of her charming figure. She sighed gently to herself, and by a rapid movement brought the whole wealth of her brown hair tumbling down upon her shoulders. Half hidden in its profusion, she inspected herself carefully in that idealizing

light. How bright her eyes were! and what a war of roses mingled in her cheeks! As she took up a large comb and began the mysteries of her evening toilet, Miss Edith could not but sympathize with the statuesque cavalier who testified to her attractions without.

She was surprised by a knock at the door and an immediate attempt to open it. She had barely time to shriek for delay and spring into bed when the elder Fenton entered, wrath in his eye, and dragging by its confining chain the fugitive 'coon. The latter sat up and rubbed its whiskers shamefacedly. Mr. Fenton—who was apparently in demi-toilet, which he had attempted to complete by wrapping a great bear-skin about his shoulders, until he looked like a giant specimen of the droll animal at his side—met the indignant black eyes of his daughter with apologetic warmth. These were all that was visible of the young lady herself, who maintained a discreet silence, hidden to her eyelids beneath the bed-quilt. Mr. Fenton coughed embarrassedly and looked down at his boots.

"Been in the 'Shadder Woods' agin?" he finally said, as if eliciting information.

No reply.

"Hevn't I told you, sis, that there were footpads in them woods?"

Sis was still silent.

The paternal Fenton, seeing that his overtures met with no success, broke forth in peevish complaint.

"Jest ez I reckoned," he sighed, biting his great forefinger in his irritation. "Ye don't care the flip-

pin' of a pecan what I say, nor nuthin'. Here your poor ole father's wearin' hisself out with worryment the hull evenin', an' you traipsin' the 'Shadder Woods' and otherwise cavortin'. Store-keeper Hackett was here inquirin' fur ye, an' I done all I could to entertain him with whiskey and keerds; but they didn't seem to take no effect onto him. Fin'ly I quit in disgust. Young Dr. Fox called this arternoon, and said them Dodd children was all down with typhoid fevier, and thet the malary was stalkin' abroad on the face o' the yearth, and you must be careful. He left some powders fur ye. And yet," concluded Mr. Fenton, tossing his arms in the agony of parental responsibility—"and yet you continues to fly in the face of Providence by consortin' in them blamed ole woods."

The eyes above the bed-quilt were apparently unmoved by this chapter of woes, but a restless movement on the part of Miss Edith's foot betrayed irritation.

"That's jest it!" continued the unhappy sire. "'Tain't nothin' new. Continue on in this way, and you'll succeed in bringin' your ole dad's gray hairs in sorrow to the grave. I was readin' in the paper to-night about Mame Yancey's goin's on. She's breakin' her father's heart, too. It must be six months she's been engaged, and now she's run off with her finanseer to San Antone and got married. This independence of young wimmen and their beaus is plumb ruination."

The irrelevance of this last statement was apparently beyond silence.

"You're too absurd, father!" Edith broke in, with a petulant kick at the bed-quilt. "What has my walking in the Shadow Woods got to do with the actions of Miss Yancey and her *fiancé*? It's too ridiculous, you old darling! Isn't it, Tommy? See, pop, he's laughing at you!" and the young girl rose upon one dimpled arm, and permitted her former rigid attitude of remonstrance to relax in undulating curves.

"It tain't absurd, Ede!" replied the old man, promptly, clutching desperately at the bear-skin which was fast slipping from him and betraying the dishabille it concealed. "It tain't foolish nuther; an' you an' me hev got to hev trouble, sis, if you keeps it up. I hev told you thet thet air blamed swale is chuck-full of road-agints and dumb ager, and a'n't no way safe fur any young woman, and now the Sheriff of Oskaloo is set-tin' down-stairs in the kitchen to prove it. I jest found him knockin' at the front door, and totin' this 'coon, which he says he found in the Shadder Woods, but I tumbled to your little racket in half a minute."

Mr. Fenton paused and endeavored to throw a look of playful cunning into his expressionless blue eyes. It was evidently a failure, for he cast down his lids with an embarrassed cough.

"This ringin' in a cold deck on me, an' otherwise neglectin' yer own flesh and blood, is onreasonable," he entreated.

Miss Edith relaxed sweetly. She reached out of bed, caught a corner of the bear-skin, and drew it towards her with all the strength of her lithe young arm.

The old man weakened. He came slowly forward, trailing the bear-skin, with visible signs of relenting in his face, which he endeavored to hide beneath gestures of remonstrance. The 'coon, seeing that the humor of the moment called for a concentration of forces, drew near the bed, and when the old man was compelled to compromise and save his equilibrium by sitting down upon its foot, the animal at once jumped into it, and attempted to establish himself on confidential terms with both parties. Miss Edith laughed, and drew him towards her and softly caressed him.

"What's this about the sheriff down-stairs?" she demanded, coaxingly.

"He's *there*," said the old man, with emphasis, "and he backs me up in all I've been sayin'. He's been detailed to do what he kin to break up the band of road-agints thet hev been interferin' with the stage line and general peace of mind of this section. He says the woods ain't no place for ye, and told me not to worry, for he reckoned you knowed it. He's a mighty good-lookin' young feller too, and, barrin' a scratched face from runnin' into a tree, kalkerlated to keep a young gal to home. Don't you reckon you better get up and help me entertain him?"

Miss Fenton shed the first part of her father's speech with calm indifference; she raised her eyebrows at the last, and clasping her hands over her knees above the bed-quilt intently regarded the old man.

"Is he light or dark?" she asked, eagerly.

"Light," said her sire—"like thet sorrel colt I'm raisin' fer ye."

Miss Edith sighed, and began to comb anew the dark tresses whose care the old man's entrance had interrupted.

"How long is he going to stay?" she inquired through the mists of her hair.

"A week, likely."

She laid down the comb at once, pushed the 'coon off the bed upon the floor, and settled herself comfortably upon her pillow. "Then I reckon there's time enough," she said, with a yawn. "I reckon the sheriff 'll look better by daylight. Good-night, papa. Close the door after you, and be sure and give Tommy Dodd a good supper." With which abrupt termination of this unseasonable interview she composed herself for slumber.

III

It was fully ten o'clock when Miss Edith Fenton came down to breakfast the following morning, but the care she had lavished upon her toilet was in marked contrast to her indifference of the night before. She had arrayed herself in a tight-fitting gown of blue velvet, trimmed with silver braid, and showing at the waist a delicious little vest of like material. Her abundant brown hair was gathered in a simple Grecian knot, and she had impaled her tresses with a great silver arrow, which gave her diminutive figure a general suggestion of Diana the huntress that was

very bewitching. As she swept into the dining-room, the little metal heels of her walking-boots clinking upon the hard-wood floor, there was that in her flashing brown eyes which showed she had come "conquering and to conquer." Her disappointment was proportional when she found her sire the only occupant of the room.

Old man Fenton was seated at the window in his shirt-sleeves, honing his razor preparatory to shaving, with a general air of peevishness and discontent. As this azure apparition dawned upon him he looked up with a malicious smile.

"I reckon ye're too late, Ede, with them fixin's and furbelows," he commented. "The sheriff hev lit out. It's a plumb shame, too," he added, admiringly, "fur the arrers I bought ye air mightily becomin'." Miss Edith opened her eyes wide at this information, but said nothing. "He seemed sorter disappointed thet ye didn't take no trouble to see him last night, and got up and vamoosed afore I was stirrin'. It must hev been an hour afore sun. He tuk the 'coon with him fur kempeny, I reckon, and went in the direction of the Shadder Woods. Ez he didn't say nothin' about comin' back, I allow thet ye hev lost him. It's too bad, sis, I declare, when ye've taken sich pains to *fetch* him."

He indicated her elaborate toilet with a wave of his razor that was appreciative and general. Miss Fenton, who had seated herself at the table and was sipping her coffee, paused, and set her cup down with a sharp clang. "He took the 'coon?" she said, angrily. "What did you let him do that for?"

"I tell ye I didn't hev nothin' to do with it," the old man responded, apologetically. "When I kem down last night he asked me ef ye was comin' down. I told him, 'Not this evenin'.' He seemed sorter sad and flambergasted, and asked me ef I hed any objections to the 'coon's sleepin' in his room. I thought it looked sing'lar, but didn't make none. He's powerful friendly with thet thar Tommy." The old man's reflections were lost upon Edith. She was looking past him, out the open door, in the direction of the Shadow Woods, with abstracted and dreamy eyes. "Ye don't reckon he means to collar thet 'coon?" said the old man, anxiously.

Miss Edith rose from her seat wearily, and went and leaned against the vine-clad pillar of the porch. The bees were busy with the wild honeysuckles, and made a pleasant droning sound.

"I don't know, I'm sure, father," she said, the same absent look in her eyes. "Is Git Thar saddled?"

"No, sis; but Abner kin do it." He looked at her steadily for a moment. "You don't reckon to go ridin' in thet thar outlandish rig?" he remonstrated.

"Why not?" said his daughter, smiling. "It's becoming, ain't it?"

"Becomin' enough," said the elder Fenton; "but since you hain't got nuthin' but prairie-dogs for an audience, I don't see what thet's got to do with it."

He ceased honing the razor, and pointed towards the valley with a wide-wave of the hand. The shrill barking of innumerable marmots filled the air with their clamor.

Miss Fenton coolly took down a small riding-cap and whip from a peg on the porch. She adjusted the cap slowly. "Well, what I need is the exercise," she replied. "And I enjoy it all the more when I know I am not frightening the crows and buzzards." She went deliberately up to him, and putting both arms around him from behind, embraced and fondled him in this roguish fashion.

The old man, thus captured and interrupted in the perilous operation of sharpening his razor, struggled and waved it impotently in the air, striving to turn his head to look at her.

"Don't," he said. "Be careful, Ede; you'll make your pore old father cut himself."

"I can't help it," said the laughing Edith. "I want to ask you something. Ain't you sorry you treated Ike so badly, you old precious darling?"

Mr. Fenton, being thus suddenly recalled to a subject forbidden between them, frowned, and dropped his razor upon the floor in his embarrassment. He faced about and regarded his daughter severely.

"No, I ain't," he said, stoutly. "I ain't noways sorry, and, what's more, I never will be. Ike Mosely isn't no match for my daughter. I don't want any paupers for sons-in-law; thet's solid."

The mirth faded out of Edith's face at once. She ceased her endearments.

"Then I sha'n't love you," she retorted, dropping the old man as if she were deeply offended, and catching up her skirts preparatory to a sudden departure. "If you don't come round on that, pop, you and I'll

have to meet as strangers." And with a wave of her riding-whip, apparently playful but significant, she dashed off the porch in the direction of the stables.

Old man Fenton stooped in some discomfiture to recover his fallen razor. He busied himself peevishly in repairing its lost edge.

But he always remembered Edith laughing at him roguishly in the doorway, and waving her whip at him, with the sunlight flashing in her hair.

IV

TEN minutes later his bewitching but disobedient daughter was galloping in the direction of the "Shadow Woods," her blue velvet gown puffing about her with the rapid motion of her pony, and affording the admiring prairie-dogs a peep of her pretty ankles. A large yellow butterfly, intoxicated with the warm air and sunlight, accompanied her a short distance upon her surreptitious journey. As she drew near the woods she slackened her pace, and rode on slowly with abstracted and listless eyes. Her red lips were parted with the ecstasy of some recollection, and she threw the bridle loosely upon the neck of her horse, her fancy captive and her thoughts adream. Still busy with these thoughts, she entered the twilight aisles of the spicy wood, and was soon lost in its shadows; but her progress was marked by the echoing foot-falls of her horse.

She had almost reached her rendezvous of the day before when a consciousness of some neighboring human presence recalled her to herself. A small fire burned at the foot of the hollow tree, over which some slices of bacon were broiling, with a few potatoes roasting in the coals. A coffee-pot set in the embers was hissing merrily, and filling the wilds with its grateful odor. Evidently her retreat was being utilized for domestic purposes. With a half-indignant feeling she drew rein, when the hanging strip of bark was pushed aside, and a light athletic figure jumped quickly down, followed by the bounding 'coon. It was the sheriff.

Evidently Mr. Mosely had undergone a strange metamorphosis. He was quite changed from the blond Apollo of the evening before. The light locks and curling beard were gone, and instead a smooth, handsome face, dark hair, and steel-blue eyes met the surprised gaze of his visitor. She stared at him a breathless moment with widely opened eyes and mounting color; the next she slipped from the saddle, and with a little joyous cry was clasped in his arms. A mocking-bird, that had been practising an amatory duet with his sweetheart all the morning was apparently stricken mute by this more practical wooing of the arch-enemy, man. For a few seconds the feathered lovers upon the limb above were treated to an edifying tableau, and then Miss Edith slipped from the sheriff's reluctant embrace, and began, after the fashion of womankind, to erase all evidences of late familiarity. She raised her hands to her head and read-

justed the silver arrow which Mr. Mosely in his pre-occupation had slightly disarranged. Meanwhile she recovered her volubility.

"To think, Ike, that it should have been *you*, dear!" she exclaimed, fondly. And *I* half frightened to death for fear some vagabond had run off with the 'coon. For shame, you naughty boy!"

She here held up one finger in so arch and fascinating a way that the sheriff was quite beside himself, and made an ineffectual attempt to embrace her again. She deftly eluded his grasp.

"No more to-day," she said, mischievously. "I think one kiss quite a plenty after such mysterious behavior as yours. But give an account of yourself, sir. What have you been up to? And why haven't you answered my letters? And what is gone with father's eyes that he should describe you as the fascinating and 'light-complected' Sheriff of Oskalo?"

A shade passed over Mosely's face, and the warm glance in his eyes became hard and glittering, like chilled steel.

"I reckoned *you'd* know it must be me, Ede," he said; "but of course I did what I could to fool the old man. There's my scalp-lock and war-paint." He indicated a blond wig and false beard thrown carelessly upon a pile of gray moss at the foot of the tree. "A travelling theatrical company got stranded in Oskalo last week. I made myself solid with the manager, and absorbed some of the properties to run up and see you. Some gutta-percha tooth-covers I

wore changed me considerable, and destroyed your father's appreciation of my ivories."

Mr. Mosely here smiled engagingly upon Edith, revealing a once very regular line of white teeth. Here and there in the upper jaw a tooth appeared to be missing.

Miss Fenton was much distressed at this lamentable dental spectacle, but the sheriff, with a laugh, dashed his hand to his mouth and quickly restored their original symmetry. He held the black cases aloft for Edith's inspection.

"How dreadful!" she exclaimed. "And is it possible these actors disfigure themselves in that way?"

"And detectives as well, I reckon," replied Mosely, as he restored the hideous things to his vest-pocket. "It's part of the trade. But come, sweetheart, how's the governor, and does he weaken any in his antipathy to me?"

Edith smiled a little sadly as she replied: "No—not a jot! Why, it ain't a half-hour ago that I left him, after stating his views in very precise language. Father's so set up since the boom in live-stock made him 'big rich!' They say 'absence makes the heart grow fonder,' but in your case, Ike, it don't seem to work. But I'm keeping at him," she added, quickly, as she noticed a hopeless look gather in the sheriff's eyes, "and if you'll only have patience, old fellow, I reckon I'll fetch him yet."

This reckless young lady accompanied the assurance with a caress so characteristic that Mr. Mosely was fain to draw nearer to her and renew his endearments.

"One moment, Edith," he said, with an intensity that thrilled her nerves. "Let me hear you say that again. Does my darling care more for my happiness than her father's?"

The girl looked up with a strange fascinated glance into the eyes gazing intently into her own. She saw their blue depths all alight with love's unutterable longing. But her feminine nature strove against the glad response of which her heart was full.

"That depends, old fellow," she whispered. "I think papa unreasonable, hard-hearted, and all that, but I can't forget that I am Reuben Fenton's daughter."

"Listen to me, little one," said her companion, taking her hand in both his own. "I want you to forget it. I want you to run away with me this very night. The game is made. The San Antonio coach is due here at 6.30. I can stop it at the crossing. We can be in Corpus Christi and married by the nearest *padre* by midnight. That done, as Sheriff Mosely's wife you can challenge all the angry fathers in the land."

Miss Edith Fenton listened eagerly to this novel proposition. There was that about it that caught her romantic fancy. But although deeply in love with the man at her side, she had the feminine desire to cut a dash at her wedding, albeit her father's prejudices against her lover made this dream unlikely of fulfilment. So she evaded the issue.

"Sheriff Mosely's wife?" she said. "And is it true, then, that you are really sheriff? I thought that was

a hoax as much as your disguise. You don't tell me that you are sheriff?"

"Certain," replied the conscious officer, blushing proudly under the eyes that were dearest to him in Greytown. "I'm rather popular with the boys, and they ran me in at the last election without finding it necessary to consult the tombstones in the burying-grounds to get a majority in the returns. I'm rather young for the place, but I've managed thus far to run one or two road-agents to ground, and justify their choice."

He laid his hands significantly on his pistols as he spoke.

"But come, Ede, we 'ain't much time to spare, and I'm not blessed with patience."

He twitched the fastenings of his pistol-belt nervously. The girl hesitated. She cast a quick glance at her saddled pony, and one at the captive 'coon, which had become entangled as usual among the dry branches of a fallen tree, and was frisking about restlessly. She drew near the sheriff, and catching him by the lapels of his coat — woman's characteristic method of taking the enemy captive—she looked earnestly up into his eyes, and decided.

"Ike," she said, "it's a reckless thing I'm going to do, and I may live to repent it; but whether I do or not, it's done from love of you, and let that end it. I reckon the time comes some day to every woman that all the world is naught to her in place of only one man, and you are *that* man, and I'm your sweetheart. I ain't exactly dressed for a wedding trip, and

blue velvet isn't just the color for a trousseau, but if you are satisfied, dear, I am. We'll stop that coach, and settle this business."

She picked up her riding-whip, which lay at her feet, and catching up the skirt of her trailing gown, made a little pirouette as she finished. With her flashing brown eyes and heightened color, she seemed a bewildering vision to the enraptured lover. He sprang forward and clasped her in his arms.

V

It was almost dark. The Corpus Christi and San Antonio coach was bowling along with flashing lights and dusty wheels, as if in rivalry of the fabulous rate of speed which the company's advertising cards announced to a credulous public. The "insides" were all quiet, and those who had been tempted by the genial weather to book as "outsides," had long since repented and gone below to drowse within the stuffy interior. The horses were jaded and the driver half asleep when they reached Greytown Crossing. Here that worthy was startled by a hail from the road-side that recalled him to his customary vigilance.

It was, indeed, a nondescript couple that demanded his attention. With the demonstrative gallantry of his class he took a soft hand in his, and assisted a diminutive but closely veiled figure to his lofty perch

on the box seat, clad in a robe that would have done credit to a prima donna. "Belton Joe" was a connoisseur of the sex, but forbore all criticism of this lady out of respect for her escort, who, heavily spurred and encumbered by his pistols, took the other place on the outside.

"How's the road?" demanded the stranger, with a keen glance of his eyes that looked almost black in the shade of his broad sombrero. "Any trouble from agents?"

Joe, who had instantly recognized in his passenger the young Sheriff of Oskaloo, became communicative at once.

"P'raps by the time we get by the 'Shadow Woods' I'll be able to tell ye, Ike. It's quiet enough down below. There's a report thar that they've all gone up kentry."

"Is that so?" queried Mosely, taking a small flask from his pocket and silently extending it to his companion.

Belton Joe's left hand closed slyly upon the "silent comforter." It was entirely hidden from view in his mighty palm. He glanced covertly at the veiled figure between them both. Then he betrayed the acuteness of his early scrutiny. Without a word he laid the four leathern reins of his profession in the small gloved hands that rested crossed upon her lap.

This confidence was too much for the fair incognita. There was a flash of the dark eyes beneath the veil as a resolute little voice said, "How did *you* know I could drive?"

"Waal," said Belton Joe, pausing in the act of imbibing the liquid refreshment, and confiding a wink with the nearest eye, "*somehow, you looked like it!*"

The veiled figure, as if in anticipation of this driver's compliment, leaned forward and took up the whip. She gathered the reins in her left hand, and deftly applied the lash to the leaders. Both men exuded admiration

"That's something like!" Joe finally said.

The sheriff rode on a few minutes in silence. Then he drew a revolver from his belt and held it towards his companion behind this intrepid rival of Phaeton.

"Can you drop a jack-rabbit at fifty yards, the way you could once?" he inquired.

Belton Joe lifted a coach lamp from its fastening and examined the arm, softly turning the cylinder.

"I reckon so," he said, simply.

The sheriff nodded. "Keep the mare well up with the sorrel, sis, and don't let her break so," he suggested. "You may have a chance to prove *that*," he added, in a low tone, to Joe.

They were just entering the Shadow Woods. The tall trunks of trees rose about them on every side, and the long, ghostly Spanish-moss swayed fitfully in the rising wind. The moon lifted a scared white face over the vague horizon, illuminating the obscurity. Afar the hoot of a melancholy owl broke the stillness. The sheriff, who was smoking silently, glanced keenly into the dim vistas as they dashed by. Presently, as the moon lifted, he grew less watchful, and abandoned himself to a proud contemplation of their intrepid

charioteer. Her veil had slipped aside with the violence of her exertions, and the velvet riding-cap, tossed back upon her head, revealed the abundant brown hair that rippled to her shoulder. Her small gauntleted hands were held rigidly before her in curbing the horses, and one little booted foot was perched saucily upon the brake. The sheriff, who sat with one arm thrown carelessly on the back of the seat in a half-unconscious attitude of proprietorship, could not resist a silent pressure of Belton Joe's hand in admiration of this equestrian tableau.

All at once a masked figure sprang from the roadside ahead, catching one of the leaders of the coach by the bridle. The horse reared, and recoiled upon the wheelers, bringing his mate to a momentary standstill. Both men rose in their seats, grasping their revolvers, as a motley group, armed with rifles, stepped into the road from the cover of neighboring trees. There was a breathless instant, during which the chief of the band, mounted upon a dark horse, called, "*Hold up!*" in a tone of command. The next, Edith Fenton, rising to her feet, laid the cracking whip smartly about the heads of the leaders and in the very face of the man who held them, starting the lumbering vehicle forward at a mad gallop. The masked figure recoiled under the lash, and let go his hold with an oath; the rudely awakened passengers shrieked with terror; and the band of robbers, left thus in the rear of the coach, seemed disconcerted by the suddenness of the stampede. A moment only. The horses were but fairly under way when the pale moon-

light was rent by a succession of blinding flashes, and a volley of rifle bullets whistled after the flying coach.

The quick, reverberating reports of the fire-arms awoke the sheriff to action.

"Don't mind the nags!" he shouted hoarsely to Joe, who was striving to dispossess Edith of the reins. "*She* can handle 'em. I reckon the mare's got it anyway, and let her run while her life lasts. *One of 'em's after us mounted; look out for him!*"

The warning was none too soon. As he spoke the hoof-beats of a horse ridden furiously thundered in their rear, and a mounted figure, brandishing a six-shooter, dashed up to the front wheel. Mosely had but an instant to glimpse him in the flash of the coach lamp, but in that instant his revolver exploded. He felt a pistol bullet sing by his cheek as he saw the rider throw up his hands and reel in the saddle. The next moment the coach stopped with a sudden lurch, the reins relaxed, and Belton Joe sprang forward with an imprecation.

"He's down!" cried Mosely, joyfully. "Let 'em out, sis! The others are distanced."

He turned as he spoke. The off wheel-horse lay dead upon the road, and Joe had slipped from his seat, supporting with difficulty the form of Edith who lay helpless and fainting in his arms.

"What's up?" said Mosely, in an anguished voice, bending over her. "Don't tell me you're hit, sis! Don't say he shot you!"

She stretched out one little hand to him feebly—a

little hand still marked by the cruel rein in that mad race for life.

"I'm faint, Ike," she murmured. "Lift me up, dear. They hit me when we first started."

The sheriff raised her tenderly in his arms.

"You drove like that—wounded?" he said.

A smile struggled to the lips of the dying girl.

"Closer, Ike," she whispered. "I can't see your face. Kiss me, dearest. When—I—get home—"

She stopped suddenly. A tremor shook her body, and she fell back in the sheriff's arms. She had reached home.

THE SHERIFF OF OSKALOO



THE SHERIFF OF OSKALOO

I

THE Sheriff of Oskaloo was in a retrospective mood. He was seated on the front gallery of the Alameda Hotel and listlessly smoking. It was four o'clock in the afternoon, and he had been sitting there since dinner-time, his eyes straying away over the level plain to the cool shadows and green vistas that bordered the river. The opportunity to indulge in reverie was unusual with him, and he regarded his present leisure with a certain cynical misgiving. For a month past there had been throughout the county no disturbance that justified his professional interference; a singular amity pervaded all commercial dealing. From his contemplative post of observation Mr. Mosely shook his head at this state of things with a grave disquietude.

"I feel," he remarked to an appreciative friend, "as if I was livin' in a powder-mill, and, if I winked more than common, somebody 'd be dead certain to fire the magazine. I wonder jest natchally what deviltry is gettin' up."

This apparent distrust of human nature on the part of Mr. Mosely was one which his calling perhaps justified. It was noticeable, moreover, that he had allowed no rust to accumulate on his six-shooters in the interval. How far the recent enforcement of a law that no private citizen should be permitted to carry revolvers may have contributed to the present public serenity is debatable. Mr. Mosely, in his official capacity, wore his prominently, with the accustomed ease and familiarity of long habit. As he reclined in his chair, their long polished barrels, protruding from his leathern belt, lent his diminutive figure an air of force and power which was generally accented by a certain hard, steely glitter in his clear blue eyes during moments of excitement. At present these eyes had in them a pensive expression to which they were not entirely strangers; and the heavy mustache, which concealed the firm mouth beneath, it swept his bronzed cheek with a caress that half softened the stern line of the jaw. It was easy to see that the natural hardihood of the man slumbered within him, and that some finer emotion had stolen upon him unchallenged.

The fact was that, under the influence of the genial sunshine and the soft, balmy air of that summer afternoon, the sheriff's memory had gone back to an episode of his early life which he seldom permitted himself to disturb, but which he cherished with tenderest affection. He had never married; and, now that there were streaks of silver in his scanty hair, he had certain lonely moments when his thoughts re-

curred to a dream of his youth that had faded almost as soon as realized. Whatever his career had been, and the exigencies of his calling had not made it a pleasant one to contemplate, he could say with truth that he had been faithful to this memory. There was one bright spot in his past about which the holiest associations were gathered, and the name "Edith" still swept over his heart with its former thrill. He pictured to himself how different his life might have been had a kindly fate spared to him the society of this lovely being of earlier days. He recalled her nameless graces, her charming coqueties, her sweet feminine candor and appreciative sympathy; and then he thought of other men, companions of his early manhood, whom he had seen gather about them the refining influences of home and children. As he contrasted their enviable lot with his own isolated, perilous existence, he seemed the loneliest man he knew, and there stole into his eyes an unaccustomed moisture that quite subdued their professional fearlessness. With a record for courage and daring that was unimpeached, he seemed to himself, at such moments, as weak as a woman; and, as his troubled gaze rested upon the wooded vistas before him, he thought he would stroll across the intervening space and try to forget it all under the familiar shadows of the pecans.


By a person of the sheriff's temperament, an idea of this kind was no sooner entertained than acted upon, and a few moments later he had penetrated the shady stillness of the grove. There was a subtle

companionship in the sturdy trunks that stood about him, their lofty tops scarcely stirring in the gentle breeze. Calm, erect, and immovable, they seemed to typify, in the austerity of their repose, that very self-reliance for which the sheriff was remarkable. The disquieted man was, in a measure, sustained by their presence. Afar in the dim wood the faint cawing of quarrelsome ravens soothed him unconsciously. In the cool, pervasive twilight about him he was beginning to regain his customary equipoise, when the sight of an unfamiliar object recalled his former musings with a distinct emotional thrill. Lying at the foot of the tree against which he was leaning was a woman's glove. The sheriff stooped and picked it up. It was a slight affair of undressed kid, and there clung to it a delicate perfume that pleasantly suggested the sex of the wearer. With a half-unconscious gesture Mosely raised it to his lips, and, as the soft trifle swept his rough cheek, his whole being was again convulsed with the anguish of a vanished memory. It was in just such a place as this that he had been wont to meet the woman he had loved. He closed his eyes dreamily, and his trembling thought went tenderly back to a little grave far away over southern hills; and, as he mused, a wood-dove on a limb above filled the air with her mournful cooing.

It was only a fancy, to be sure; but as the sheriff listened, with nerves all aquiver with sad recollections, the plaintive cry seemed to him the moan of some disembodied spirit in the air about him. Perhaps the wraith of the love he had lost was that instant

hovering near him in the recesses of the wood. He raised his eyes involuntarily to the blue vault, and, as he did so a small white bird, aloft in the limitless ether, drifted on motionless pinions far above his head, and dropped from sight behind the leafy veil of the trees. The sheriff sighed. Even thus, in a breath, he thought, we are gone. With a half-caressing tenderness he smoothed out the crumpled glove, and placed it in the breast-pocket of his ducking-jacket.

He stood there some moments, lost in an abstracted reverie, until the pleasant sound of voices came to him through the wood. The sheriff was in a mood when he shrank from scrutiny, and, without betraying his presence, ran his swiftly observant eyes hurriedly over objects about him. At some distance in front of him he perceived the figures of a young man and woman seated at the base of a mighty boulder and engaged in conversation. The girl was talking rapidly and earnestly, with pretty feminine gestures of protest and appeal. Her companion listened in an attitude of dejection. He had cast his hat upon the ground, and his bowed head rested upon his hands. To the soothing remonstrances of the woman he made no response; and presently the pleasant voice ceased its entreaty. There was a short interval of silence, during which Mosely, wishing to escape observation, sank down quietly at the foot of the tree. When the sheriff looked again, the woman had bent her head upon the shoulder of her dejected companion, and was wiping the tears from her eyes with a diminutive handkerchief.



There was something in this little incident so in keeping with Mosely's own reflections that he felt its pathos mingled with a keen curiosity. He shrewdly guessed that the young woman was the owner of the glove he had just found, and he felt a natural inclination to restore it; but it was evident the occasion was not a fitting one. Such an act on his part would be attended, under the circumstances, with an embarrassment he did not care to cause. Perhaps he would not have hesitated in the case of strangers; but it happened that both parties were well known to him. He recognized in the weeping girl Miss Jessie Meredith, the daughter of a wealthy cattle-owner of Oskaloos. The young fellow was Dick Heyward, for whom the sheriff entertained a cordial regard. He had long suspected a secret attachment to exist between the couple, and now he had unwittingly stumbled upon their little romance. He would have willingly retraced his steps; but he could not do this without betraying the fact that they had been observed. So he remained seated at the foot of the tree, speculating not a little on the cause of the girl's disquietude.

"The old story," he told himself, thinking of the proverbial trials and disappointments of clandestine lovers, and recalling certain tears in his own experience which he would have given worlds not to have caused. Somehow, the irony of fate seemed to him even more cruel than before; and, lost to his immediate surroundings, he became tinged with a gentle melancholy. A sudden beam of sunlight, falling

through the branches overhead, recalled him to himself.

Whatever farewells were exchanged between the lovers had evidently taken place in the interval. On raising his eyes he espied the erect figure and fluttering skirts of Miss Jessie far across the level meadow that led to the village. The girl was walking rapidly, as if belated, and in a few moments disappeared from view behind some intervening shrubbery. Surprised at this sudden departure, Mosely turned to see if Heyward still kept his position. The young man was seated in the same despondent attitude, but apparently examining something intently. His behavior was singular. Mosely regarded him critically, and his quick ear caught the sharp, familiar click of steel. He saw Heyward rise suddenly to his feet and place something to his head that glanced in the sunlight. On the instant the sheriff sent his voice before him through the wood in a shrill scream of warning that awoke its remotest echoes.

The man started, faced about, and a revolver fell involuntarily from his hand. With a bound, in which trained nerve and muscle seemed at once to assert their accustomed energy, the sheriff hurried to his side.

Evidently his intrusion was as unwelcome as it was unexpected. After the first shock of surprise, Heyward had thrown himself down again disconsolately at the foot of the bowlder. In this attitude he was found by the panting sheriff.

"What's up, Dick?" said Mosely, briskly.

For answer, the man flung a pebble at a neighboring tree and turned away with a hopeless gesture.

"You ain't reckonin' to put an end to yerself?" the sheriff inquired, stooping and possessing himself of the relinquished pistol.

Heyward aimed a kick at a fragment of bark, but said nothing.

The sheriff lost his temper at this obstinacy.

"Look here," he said. "Dick Heyward, this child's-play is all nonsense. I'm a friend of yours, and I want to know what's gone wrong with ye."

After a few moments' sullen contemplation of his boots, the dejected figure became briefly communicative.

"I lost my pile last night at Jim Wily's."

"Buckin' agin faro?"

"No—Mexican monte."

The sheriff whistled to himself contemptively.

"When are you goin' to give up thet business?" he said, severely. "I thought you told me you'd quit gamblin'."

"I reckoned to give it all up," the man said, sullenly, plucking at the grass about him.

"I see you did," said the other, quietly. Then, stooping down, he put one hand upon the shoulder of his companion, and gazed long and critically into his eyes.

"See here, Dick, you don't want to play an old feller like me. What's up between you and Jessie?"

"Nothin'," said Heyward, doggedly.

"In course not," rejoined the sheriff, with an in-

credulous sneer. "Hez the old man asked you to marry her lately?"

Heyward laughed bitterly.

"He said he'd postpone thet until he consulted with you on the subject," he replied.

Mr. Mosely shed this evident sarcasm with a shrug of his shoulders.

"You wouldn't lose nothin' by his doin' thet," he remarked, convincingly. "Come, old chap," he said, in a friendly tone, "aren't you crowdin' the mourners? I know the old man's a crank, and it's all thet young blood can do to put up with it. But you've got too good stuff in ye to give up in this fashion. Them ez does this thing," the sheriff remarked, rising to his feet and appealing to the surrounding trees in witness of the folly of suicide, "is nothin' short of cowards or jackasses. I've known you for the last dozen years, and yer name ain't found in either directory."

Touched by the manner of the sheriff, Dick Heyward assumed a half-erect attitude.

"It ain't thet the old man don't like me," he said, doggedly; "but he's backin' somebody else, and I can't do nothin'. He sent me word this afternoon by Jessie not to come near his ranch, nor to call on his daughter. Bein' ez I'm cleaned out now, it don't make so much difference, and I reckoned the easiest way out of the hull bizness was to get out!"

Heyward stared before him in a hopeless way.

"Stuff!" said Mosely, with sudden emphasis. He drew a couple of cigars from his pocket, and tossed one to his companion.

"Who does the old man favor?" he inquired, striking a match.

"Thet's what gets me!" returned Heyward, disconsolately, disdaining the proffered cigar. "I never met him, and Jessie won't tell me, because she allows I'd have a row with him."

"Sensible girl," said the sheriff, nodding through the smoke-wreaths about his head. "She don't care for him, I reckon?"

"She allows she don't," returned Heyward. "Natchally I can't say."

The sheriff ruminated for a few moments in silence. "I reckon she oughter know," he replied. He took a long pull at his cigar, and expelled the smoke forcibly.

"Old man," he said, glancing down affectionately at his friend, "do you remember thet little bizness you did for me once, when thet blackleg allowed to call me in with thet double-barrelled shot-gun?"

Heyward looked up at him.

"You mean Johnson?"

"Yes," said the sheriff, "I mean Johnson. Are you tryin' to tell me thet a man, who kin shoot a rascal dead in his tracks ez nip and percise ez you did on thet occasion, ain't built for somethin' better than to put this miserable toy shooter to his head and throw up the game, jest because the luck's agin him? Dick Heyward," he said, severely, "for a young man with points and a good girl to work for, you come the nearest to bein' a plumb idgit of anybody I've ever seen."

Dick Heyward shrugged his shoulders under this wholesale castigation.

"What's a fellow goin' to do?" he pleaded. "Run away and get married?"

"No," said Mosely, sternly; "not in no circumstances. No man is justified in takin' a young woman away from her father and mother without they give him leave."

"What then?" asked Heyward, hopelessly.

"Look here," said Mosely, quickly: "I've been a young man myself, and I can feel for ye. I did thet very thing you speak of, and it killed the loveliest woman thet was ever born. I've had my hard lines too, and I tell you thet there's nothin' I wouldn't do to wipe out thet one act of a rash and hot-headed boy."

Heyward had risen to his feet during this last appeal.

"I've been pretty near where you've been," continued the sheriff, in strong emotion, turning his gaze upon his surprised companion; "and what a man wants, that day, is some friend to put an arm around him and stand by."

With a strong potential gesture the sheriff laid both hands upon the shoulders of his companion and looked him full in the eyes.

"Dick Heyward," he said, firmly, "tell me you'll quit gamblin', and I'll appoint you my deputy this minute."

The ruined gamester met the resolute orbs of his friend, and felt a subtle influence of power. Clear

and compelling, their indomitable glance thrilled his resolves and strengthened his feeble will.

He grasped both hands of the sheriff in his own, and said :

“I’ve cashed my last chip, Ike ; I swear it !”

“I knowed it! I knowed it!” said Mosely, fervently. With a sudden contemptuous gesture, he flung far away from him the small Derringer he had held. The flashing weapon circled through the twilight wood, and fell with a tiny splash into the neighboring river.

The sheriff put his hand significantly to the great six-shooters that hung in his belt.

“And now,” he said, “to a man’s work and a man’s weapons. It’s in you, Dick, to behave yourself and to win this woman.”

He paused, and, as if in earnest of his previous words, threw one arm affectionately about his companion.

“And through it all, old man, in luck and out of luck, yer best friend is Ike Mosely. Don’t you never forgit it.”

He turned, gripped the hand of his companion in his quick, nervous clasp, and together they passed out of the grove.

II

WITH his appointment as deputy sheriff a great change came upon Heyward's life. Hitherto he had led an aimless, listless existence, with little thought for the morrow or its obligations. A good-looking, easy-mannered fellow, he had tried his hand at the various means of livelihood which the frontier town afforded, and found little difficulty in satisfying the scanty needs of that primitive civilization. A dreamer of dreams and the possessor of sound health, he made no provision for the future; so, when the mechanical toil of one occupation palled upon him, he readily forsook it for another. From beginning life as an apprentice to a carpenter, he had aspired to the exciting life of a stage-driver, and, finding that too laborious, had abandoned it for the duties of postmaster and clerk in the village store. Wearying in turn of these, he left the town behind him, and followed for a time the wild life of the plains—learning, amid cow-camps and sheep-ranches, the rude details of a perilous calling. But the same restless spirit which sent his comrades periodically to town invariably brought Heyward thither, to vie with them in recklessness and extravagance. Thus it was that the money, earned at the risk of life and limb, found, in the hands of this careless spendthrift, the inevitable goal of the gaming-

table, until, as we have seen, the sheriff discovered his improvident friend stranded and desperate.

Far different from the easy makeshifts of his former life were the demands of his new calling. Responsibility and method were to be the watchwords of his future. Appreciating that the change in his habits would be best brought about by close companionship, the practical sheriff arranged that his deputy should reside with him. In the bare and box-like cottage which he called his own there were none of the allurements that had formerly betrayed his protégé. The sheriff's home was as austere as his daily existence. There was little about his lonely cabin that did not smack of the hand-to-hand fight with danger, which was its owner's daily portion. But, with the ready tact and cheerful hardihood that characterized him, Mr. Mosely addressed himself to his pupil. I pass over the long homilies, the shrewd bits of advice, the daily practice in the use of fire-arms, with which the neophyte was favored. Suffice it that, with that easy adaptability which seemed his by nature, he became readily proficient; and that, when a sudden outbreak of "road-agents" in a neighboring county justified the sheriff's former misgivings, and summoned both to the scene of hostilities, Dick Heyward acquitted himself with a skill and intrepidity that justified Mr. Mosely's warmest commendation.

Six weeks of their adventurous life had thus rolled away, and there had been no allusion made by the sheriff to the theme of which Heyward's heart was full. Beyond a vague statement on the part of his

chief, that he would "use his inflooise with the old 'un," Mr. Mosely had refrained from referring to the subject. Heyward often wondered whether his friend realized that he had had no glimpse of Jessie in the interval, and that his heart ached with loneliness and foreboding. Indeed, as the days passed by, it seemed to Dick that a strange moodiness and abstraction possessed his companion. After a few shrewd inquiries as to the temperament and character of the man he was to approach, the sheriff abandoned himself to long silences, wrapped in clouds of tobacco-smoke, or given over to diligent and profitless whittling upon the door-stone. It was a phase of Mosely's character which had not hitherto presented itself to Heyward, and it troubled him, as the strange and unaccountable always do. But when he drew the attention of certain fellow-townsmen to the matter, their comments were reassuring and characteristic.

"Figurin' on his chances of re-election," said these philosophers. "Ike's took thet way occasional, and ye know he allowed to run agin, next fall. Prob'ly reckons he's bit off more'n he kin chew."

Somehow this explanation did not satisfy Heyward.

It was a pleasant afternoon, some days after this, when Sheriff Mosely left his lonely cottage, wrapped apparently in the same gloomy reverie that had lately oppressed him. To the observant spectator there was something in his appearance that suggested business of a novel and peculiar nature. The well-worn suit of brown ducking, that usually clothed his nervous figure as if a part of the actual man, had been dis-

carded for newer garments of conventional pattern, known on the frontier as "store-clothes." In them, the worthy officer betrayed an uncomfortable sense of being "dressed up," that was accented by the "boiled shirt" and standing collar which oppressed his sinewy neck. Nor did he regard with complacency the "fine boots" which gave his trousers a painful appearance of being too short for their wearer.

He stooped before a small spring that bubbled along the road he was pursuing, and drew a pocket-flask from his hip with a preoccupied air.

"I reckon the old feller don't irrigate," he said to himself, solemnly. "All the more reason why I should get myself in fix to wrestle with him."

He raised the flask to his lips and partook freely of its contents. Evidently the stimulant did not possess its customary virtues.

"Somehow ye don't seem to reconcile me none to the situation," he soliloquized, addressing the flask. "I hed ruther conduct a dozen 'neck-tie matinees' than approach a parent on the subject of his darter."

At this moment the footfall of a horse struck the sheriff's alert ear, and a young woman rode suddenly up to the side of the spring. Mr. Mosely restored the flask to his hip with an abashed expression. It needed but a glance to discover that the fair equestrienne was none other than Miss Jessie Meredith, and attired in a fashion to provoke the admiration of mankind. As the sheriff noted the brown eyes, fresh complexion, and bewildering dimples that had proved so disquieting to his friend's peace of mind, he was fain

to confess the excellence of his taste on purely æsthetic grounds. Apparently the first impulse of the gray-haired man was to pay tribute to this vision of beauty, for his hand sought the pocket of his coat containing the missing glove he had picked up in the wood.

"I happen to have a little favor of yours I've been wanting to restore to you, miss," he said, abruptly ; then, becoming aware of the change in his attire, and that he had forgotten to transfer it, he stopped in confusion.

"My glove, I presume," the fair apparition returned, smiling down at him from the saddle, as her mustang pony plunged his nostrils in the cool spring after his recent canter. "I remember I lost it over on the river weeks ago ; but it's a matter of no consequence."

She raised her frank brown eyes to the sheriff's keen scrutiny, and a sudden blush mantled her cheek.

"How is Mr. Heyward?" she inquired. "I understand he has made his home with you lately."

"He's up at the shanty—where I reckon I left your glove," the sheriff rejoined, quietly, but secretly beside himself with admiration at the courage which thus demanded her lover's welfare. He paused a moment, as if to collect himself, and then adopted an equally fearless policy.

"I hope you'll excuse me, Miss Meredith," he said, "but Dick has given me the bed-rock in this little matter, and I want to say that my sympathies are with you and him from way back. I was jest now on my

way to have a little tangle with your old gentleman, to see what I could do to put things in good fix. I reckon I'm competent so far as Dick is consarned, for I love the boy, and he hain't no points that I don't onderstand. But, you see, in regard to your governor, I'm somehow off the trail. Ef the old man hez got any crankiness, or other foolishness it'd be wise for me to steer clear of, bein' ez your heart's in this bizness, I'd be obliged for any light you'd throw on the subject afore I wade in."

Having concluded this remarkable appeal, which was delivered in a confidential undertone, the sheriff doffed his broad sombrero and patiently waited the lady's reply.

Miss Meredith, thus abruptly confronted with the sheriff's purpose, was quite overcome with embarrassment. She blushed like a peony, under the searching glance of the man before her, and seemed at first uncertain what to say or do. In her agitation, she dropped her riding-whip. Her eyes, which had hitherto dwelt calmly on Mr. Mosely, wandered up and down the trail-road restlessly.

"I'm sure—it's very kind of you—Mr. Mosely—to take this interest," she began, hesitatingly; "but I'm afraid papa wouldn't like to have you speak to him about it."

"That's jest it!" returned Mosely, "and I reckon it's mighty lucky I run across you this very afternoon. I've been figgerin' on the matter until I've pretty near lost my grip; and now, miss, I'm goin' to ask you to turn back, and we'll try and corral the old

man in partnership. I'll put it to him fair and square ; and, if he rares or shows any signs of kickin' in the traces, you kin stand by and kinder put the curb on him. I reckon you look as if you might be able to do it, and, when strangers prove anyway excitin', there's nothin' like the presence of a man's own flesh and blood to prevent his raisin' the roof."

He bestowed an appreciative glance on Miss Meredith, as he gallantly restored the riding-whip. The young lady was still embarrassed.

"But, you see, I have something else I wanted to do this afternoon—another engagement."

The sheriff gave a shrewd glance in the direction of his distant cottage.


"I know it," he said, quickly ; "but Dick is very busy to-day. I left him cleanin' up my Winchesters and six-shooters ; and, besides, you and I don't want to ring anything in on the governor that isn't straight and above-board. He's seen fit to quarantine Dick from your society ; and, unless he gives the word, we don't want to start in anything onderhanded. Come, miss—you go back with me, and we'll have a reg'lar tow-row with the old gentleman over the situation."

He slipped her horse's bridle over his arm as he spoke, and took a step or two, as if to compel her compliance.

"In all affairs of this kind," he said, reassuringly, glancing back at her, "some one hez got to break the ice and start the mill, or we don't get nowhar. I reckon, in the present case, we've got a big contract ; but, whatever the old man proposes, at least we'll

meet him in the open." And, by sheer force of will, he led the unwilling maiden off captive.

Meanwhile, left to himself in the cottage, Dick Heyward, pursuing his task of cleaning the sheriff's fire-arms, was speculating sadly over his unfortunate love-affair and the sheriff's singular change of manner. Engrossed in his work, there suddenly seemed to come to him, on the breeze that was borne up the valley, the sound of a well-remembered voice. He raised his head and listened. It must have been a fancy; and yet, half wonderingly, he stepped to the door and cast a longing glance down the dim trail-road. He beheld the sheriff in conversation with a lady on horseback, and the flash of a familiar gray dress through the trees at once disclosed her identity. His nervous hand closed tight upon the revolver he was cleaning, in the suddenness of his surprise. Why was it? He was not jealous of the gray-haired man who had so recently left him? He dared not trust himself to say; and, after a few moments' reverie, he left the door with an impatient gesture. The incident disquieted him; and, when an hour later he went to the closet to procure some implement, he was flushed and irritated, and a nervous light shone in his eyes. The tool he wanted did not readily present itself, and half unconsciously he made a rapid examination of the pockets of an old coat in the closet, in his efforts to find it. Some formless object was hidden in the breast of the garment. He drew it quickly forth. Crushed, crumpled, but still redolent of odor, he spread it out, and discovered a woman's soiled




glove. Dick Heyward smiled grimly to himself. Had the sheriff, too, his own romance? The next moment he dashed the glove upon the floor and spurned it beneath his heel in a sudden frenzy. It was Jessie's! He knew it by the peculiar brown stitching he had often examined, and the perfume so strangely familiar. In the first tumult of his jealous agony, he put both hands to his eyes, as if to blot out the sight of the hateful object. A shudder shook him, and he groaned aloud. Then he ran to the door and cast a quick, searching glance down the narrow valley. There was no one in sight. Down by the spring, where he had formerly seen the couple in conversation, the shrill scream of a soaring hawk came distinctly to him, as it wheeled aloft in the still, breezy afternoon. To the man's startled nerves it seemed like the mocking cry of some demon who was cognizant of the agony within him.

It was all clear now; and Heyward reeled against the wall as he comprehended the significance of the weeks that had gone over his head, while his rival had improved the opportunity of his absence. It had all been a plot, devised by the sheriff and Jessie's father, to cheat him of the love he coveted. He understood now the former's reticence and singular apathy. The man so vaguely understood by him to be a disputant for his sweetheart's affections was the sheriff—Mosely himself! In his rage and mortification the indignant deputy caught up a pair of six-shooters and began to load them rapidly, the steel

cylinders clicking ominously, as if in remonstrance, under his eager fingers.

There was but one way now, and his mind was made up to it. He would seek out the man who had thus betrayed him, upbraid him with his perfidy, press a six-shooter upon him, and force him to defend at the revolver's muzzle the flagrancy of his conduct. His brain was on fire with his wrongs, and his hands shook as he caught up his hat from the table and buttoned his pistol-belt about him. He cast one hurried glance around at the dwelling which had grown to be a home to him in the days now past. How quiet and still it looked, how utterly out of sympathy with the mad emotions which thrilled him ! His eyes fell upon the glove lying upon the floor—a mute witness to the treachery of its owner—and, with a muttered imprecation, he caught it up and strode away, slamming the door behind him with a violence that shook the rafters.

As his swift footsteps took him rapidly from the little cottage the wrath that was in him surged in his brain and spoke in his heart. Where could he find a parallel for the treachery of this man he had called his friend ? What cause, pray, had he to attempt to settle his quarrel in the interest of right and justice ? Had not the culprit placed himself, by his act, beyond the pale of mercy ? Was he justified in giving so double-dyed a villain a single chance for his miserable existence ? Ought he not rather to rush upon him, and, with an imprecation on his baseness, shoot him down as ruthlessly as he might some desperate assassin ?



And, as he thought, he heard a quick step along the road ahead of him, and a familiar voice apparently in exultant conversation. With his fell purpose still mastering him and his hand clutching a revolver, he sprang aside and dashed into the thicket.

The voices drew near. They were those of a man and woman. Apparently they were discussing something of a jocular nature, for occasional peals of laughter were heard by the listener. Straining his ears, he with difficulty made out the following :

"I reckoned I was plumb done for when I first opened up the subjeck to the old gentleman," said the voice of Mosely. "Lord! when he first brought them gray optics o' his'n to bear on me, I felt like throwin' up my hands. But I sez to myself, 'Ike, yer in fur it,' and I jest waded in. And, when I got my blood up in the heat and thick o' the argyment, I didn't mind. I sorter let go my hobbles and went in foot-loose. Did you hear him when he aired them views o' his'n on what a husband should be? Geewittaker! I never reckoned thet was only a game of bluff. I sez to myself, 'Mosely, he's got the drop on ye now; ye needn't say nothin',' until I riz right up and summed up the case in a few words. I said my say, and then I axed him plump and squar; and dern my skin ef he didn't weaken! He weakened and give his consent ez gentle ez a lamb."

"And I am so happy," said a soft voice, which thrilled the listener through every fibre.

"Natchally," returned Mosely, fervently, "jest natchally; but no more than I, sis. Why, I'm a ten-

derfoot ef this ain't one of the happiest days— Hello ! what's that ?”

A stone, dislodged from a neighboring embankment, came hurtling down into the road. The next moment a frenzied figure, torn with the thicket and brandishing a cocked revolver, burst from the roadside and confronted the sheriff upon the highway.

“ In God's name, Dick, what's gone with you ?” exclaimed the startled man, recoiling before the threatening attitude of his friend.

Dick Heyward, panting with suppressed passion, his muscles twitching with excitement, his face drawn and blanched, at first could not reply. He paid no heed to the frightened girlish figure by the sheriff's side. His eyes, wild with an intense fury, seemed to dilate and comprehend the sheriff only.

“ You ask me that ?” at last he burst forth. “ I should think you'd ask me that ! Here — take this six-shooter ! step off ten paces, and, if you're a man, Ike Mosely, and not a blackguard—”

“ Easy, now ! easy, Dick, over the rough places !” returned the imperturbable sheriff, but grasping in his steady hand the pistol which the trembling fingers of the other forced upon him. He regarded his furious friend calmly, and his clear, cold blue eye shone like a diamond.

“ You know me, pard ; my record's a clear one. I don't do nothin' I ain't willin' to back, and, ef I've wronged you in any way, I'll meet you sartin. But speak out, boy ! Are you crazy, Dick ? What hev you got agin me ?”

With a quick movement Heyward tore the telltale glove from his breast and cast it upon the ground between them.

"How came you by that?" he asked, sternly.

The eyes of Mosely dwelt upon the missing gauntlet an instant, and then lighted up with a humorous gleam. He stooped, and, with a quick gesture, restored it to his companion.

"There's thet unfortunet glove I told you I found in the grove over a month since," he said, carelessly. Then he took the hand of the embarrassed girl, and, with a strong, compelling gesture, placed it in the grasp of his astounded deputy.

"Old man," he said, "ef I hadn't been in love myself, and didn't know what an idgit it makes of the best men, I'd be tempted to step out here and exchange shots with you, jest to teach you a moral lesson. Here for the last six weeks I've hed this subjeck on my mind to an extent that it's broke my sleep and interfered with my appetite. It's done more to put gray in my hair than anything I ever attempted, and, when at last I got my spunk up and interviewed the old man fur ye—told him how changed ye were, and sorter contemplated ye ez I might a brand-new statue I'd been makin'—set things in a proper light, and got his consent to the match, you turns upon me and reckons to scalp me like a wild Injun. It's enough," said the sheriff, solemnly, baring his head and glancing upward reverentially—"the foolishness thet the course of true love will ring in on a rational creetur is almost enough to shake one's faith in a beneficent God."



“YALLER-BIRD”



“YALLER-BIRD”

I

It was a little motte of trees on the Texan frontier. “Yaller-bird” was lying under a cotton-wood. Yaller-bird was very hot and tired; Yaller-bird’s bare feet were scratched and torn with the cactus; Yaller-bird’s sheep had been very obstreperous. It was Yaller-bird’s opinion that sheep-herding was very poor business.

But all labor has its intervals of repose, and his had come. The sheep were shading. From the little hillock whereon he lay he could see them clustered about the slender trunks of the live-oaks. The ardent sun, towering at the zenith, sought for them through the scanty shade, and the panting ewes and sleepy lambkins broke from time to time into lamentation. But they were in the main quiet. The scampering feet, that had kept poor Yaller-bird’s diminutive legs in perpetual motion since early morning, were curled up beneath them. Yaller-bird breathed a prayer of thanksgiving.

It was very pleasant under the cotton-wood. A

faint whisper—the balmy breath of the “flower prairie”—visited his cheek with its memories of wild verberna and buffalo-clover. Down in the little pool at the foot of the hillock a few quarrelsome teal were wrangling amid the water-grasses, the bright sunlight flashing upon their glossy wings and emerald crests. A plaintive killdeer piped along its border, stopping every now and then to bow repeatedly in the sedge with the oppressive courtesy by which that bird attempts to atone for its general melancholy. A few paces below him two saucy prairie-dogs barked at him boldly from their sandy citadel—apparently resenting his bare and upturned feet. Yaller-bird began to yield to the drowsy influences of his surroundings. His dark lashes drooped, shading two very bright eyes that usually were as wide-awake and eager as a jack-rabbit’s. Their jetty fringes swept a pair of flushed and freckle-strewn cheeks. The pipe of killdeer and the bark of prairie-dog faded into drowsy murmurs and musical cadences. A long-drawn sigh. Yaller-bird was asleep.

But perhaps you are wondering how this lazy, idle, not very clean, little boy came by such an absurd title as “Yaller-bird.” That question is easily answered. It is the way of the frontier, where everybody is christened anew. “Yaller-bird” is a nickname; and Sam Magee is the more conventional title by which his parents chose to designate this sleeping shepherd. Howbeit, the oddity of the name is not entirely fanciful. Sam provoked it by his original and peculiar notions of dress. It was his custom to recognize sev-

eral different zones in his daily toilet. His bare feet usually answered for the torrid; his straw hat represented the temperate; the mammoth pair of ducking pantaloons in which Sam buried his lower limbs in oblivion, and whose disposition to swallow his small anatomy he encouraged even to the height of his shoulder-blades, with the aid of one strained and much-enduring suspender, was supposed to indicate his belief in the frigid; while his conviction of the existence somewhere of a perpetual rainy season was pleasingly indicated by continually wearing a long yellow "slicker;" and though in this picturesque attire he forcibly suggested a sugar-cured Cincinnati ham of roving tendencies, Sam's sponsor had preferred to recognize the brightness of his eyes and his general disposition to be "peart and chipper" under the present ornithological title.

Aside from the worry and trouble his sheep had given him, it had been a rather eventful morning with Yaller-bird. That red spot on his cheek that looks as if it might have bled a little is a present from a mocking-bird, whose nest of five young birds his prying eyes had discovered. Lying on his back in the shade of a thorny mesquite he had espied the dainty abode of the Southern nightingale perched in a secure fork, and, succeeding in climbing to it—after ventilating the yellow slicker thoroughly upon the thorns that opposed his progress—had feasted his eyes on the dusky songsters which in future were to fill the prairie-levels with their wild mimicry. Being so rash as to handle one of this infant quartet, the

old bird had made an ambitious effort to deprive Sam of one of the eyes that had betrayed her. Yaller-bird quickly replaced the callow songster and slid to the ground, leaving a long strip of his upper garment hanging to a thorn and fluttering in the breeze like a Chinese banner—a flapping emblem of his cowardice. But he “buried all regret for his mishap, apparently, in the voluminous folds of his trousers.”

Then a narrow escape from stepping upon a lazy rattlesnake that threw itself into coil and sprung its alarming clock-spring had moved Sam to redeem his reputation. Gathering a few stones, he delivered them with that fatal aim peculiar to the American small boy, and finally succeeded in slaying his snake-ship, after which he whipped out the ubiquitous jack-knife and deprived him of his castanet—nine rattles and a button. With infinite pride—after trying hard to shake these in rivalry of their dead owner, and failing miserably—he buried them, with other trophies of the morning’s wanderings, in the oblivion of his dropsical pantaloons.

The sun was beginning to decline, and the dwarfed shadows of the live-oaks to lengthen, when he was awakened by the bleating of his straying sheep. The lambs had already begun their evening games of “tag” and “hide-and-seek.” The querulous ewes were noisy and disgusted, as only nervous and anxious mothers can be. What was that causing such a commotion in the flock far away to the right? With a shout Sam caught up his canteen and shepherd’s

crook, and flew down the hill as fast as his short legs could carry him.


In a few minutes he reached the spot. A few old sheep were huddled about a small object. Several appeared to be very indignant, and were showing their rage by stamping violently with their sharp fore-feet. With a wave of his light hat and crook Sam dispersed the group and stood over the helpless thing. *A small antelope.* Sam gave a shout of delight.

It was so beautiful an object that Yaller-bird exuded admiration. His caressing hand passed tenderly over its soft coat and slender limbs. A lovely fawn color faded away on its sides into a dazzling white. Its dainty feet were shod with jet-black buskins. The eyes into which Sam peered were large and soft, and shone with a mild lustre like twin stars. From the tip of the quivering muzzle, which it raised helplessly up into Sam's face, to the stump of a white tail, which it wiggled incessantly, it was altogether lovely. Yaller-bird appreciated this fact and raised it upon its feet.

It was very weak and feeble, and walked like an interesting invalid. Sam gave a quick glance of rage at the curious sheep that were crowding around—an attentive and bleating circle of feminine gossips. All at once it occurred to him that this weakness might be due to hunger. He extended his crook suddenly, caught old "Granny"—the "bell sheep"—a staid and matronly ewe which acted as guide for the flock—caught her by the joint of her incautious hind-leg and drew her towards him. With much effort Sam suc-

ceeded at last in tripping up the struggling dame and sitting down triumphantly upon her. Then he reached out his hand for the fawn, but it had tottered beyond his reach. He tried his crook. It stood upon its slender legs just beyond him. Here was a dilemma. But boyhood is fruitful in expedient. After a few minutes of profound thought, Sam, still seated upon the disconsolate ewe, proceeded to take off his single suspender. He accomplished this finally, although in the attempt he imperilled his already loose slicker, and ran the risk of entirely shedding his trousers. Then, with every evidence of complete and entire satisfaction, he tied the four legs of his woolly seat firmly together, and rose and surveyed the satisfactory result.

Now, Granny had been a very unfortunate sheep that morning. When the sun first beheld her leaving the brush pen she was a very proud mother, and had a promising lambkin like the rest. But while she was intent upon her early breakfast it had wandered away from her side, and, upon missing Granny, mistook the first big object that it saw for its mother, as all lambs of tender years are apt to do. This proved to be a patient and long-suffering mule whose tendency to avoid capture had been overcome by hipling her fore-feet with rawhide. But the effect of these hiplings was to make "Jinny" even more careless and promiscuous with her feet than Missouri mules are generally, and in the course of the morning she proved herself a very harsh step-mother by treading cruelly upon her adopted offspring. When, later in



the day, Granny discovered her unhappy lamb trodden into a shapeless mass she had wailed dismally, and refused to be comforted. But the lambkin spake not nor stirred.

This was Yaller-bird's brilliant idea: *to make Granny adopt the antelope*. He had been brought up on a sheep-ranch and knew all the tricks of the trade. So after he had succeeded in making Granny nurse her new charge, and had satisfied himself that the mother antelope was nowhere in the vicinity, he proceeded to put his plan into operation. He released Granny, and walked away to the tree where he had laid her dead lamb. He carried the young fawn with him. Then, opening his ready jack-knife, without more ado he sat down and gravely stripped off the hide of the dead lamb. Granny watched him with much bleating, jingling of her bell, and stamping of her feet. He now wrapped the wet hide loosely around the antelope, fastening it on securely with strips of his tattered slicker. This deer in lamb's clothing he unblushingly offered to Granny as a substitute for the offspring she had lost. Granny sniffed at it, looked it all over, and finally showed a disposition to adopt it. Yaller-bird heaved a sigh of relief, resumed his single suspender, shut up his jack-knife, and buried it in his fathomless pocket.

II

THE house in which Yaller-bird lived was more ambitious and substantial than most Texan "ranches." It was built in a grove of great pecans that grew in a hollow beside a silent pool. Overhead the arching limbs made an impenetrable shade, shutting out the glaring sunlight that in the summer months dismayed the only rickety thermometer in their meagre "outfit," and diffusing a grateful coolness in the bosky depths. It was more like a huge barn, two stories high, than anything else. Below, its interior was fitted up with stalls for horses and cribs for cows, and outside the heavy barred door a huge corral—built strongly of stumps of trees and sticks of rough timber, driven into the ground and lashed together with rawhide—formed a secure fold against the attacks of wildcats and wandering coyotes. When you had ascended a rough ladder to a front portico or gallery, you reached the apartments of the owners, who dwelt above their stock. Yaller-bird occupied a little room, from whose window he looked out among the branching limbs. He might almost have been said to live in a tree, and when he peered from this nest-like window his nickname did not seem to him somehow so inappropriate.

When he came home with his flock that evening he

shut them up in the corral; but first tying a long *riata* about Granny's neck, tethered her to one of the pecans. Then with his newly-found pet in his arms he mounted to the gallery. Here he hesitatingly lifted the latch and entered. Sam was not sure of his reception.

"Hello, Yaller-bird! Wot hev ye been totin' up to the ranch now to eat me outer house and hum?" said a gruff voice.

Sam shot an inquiring glance across the big room, hazy with the smoke of *cigaritos* and fragrant with burning tobacco, and beheld his father and Judge Natchez stretched upon two husk mattresses and lazily smoking. It was to the legal gentleman that Sam was indebted for his pleasing title.

"Got an antellup!" chirped Yaller-bird, exhibiting his prize.

"Whar did ye ketch thet?" said his father, sitting up.

"Over by Cotton-wood Ridge," replied Sam.

"Cotton-wood Ridge!" echoed his father. "Say, judge, bean't thet whar ye shot thet old un ye brought in this mornin'?"

"I reckon," said the judge, winking quietly at Sam's father. "Near as I can git to it, Magee, thet's my fawn. Much obliged to Yaller-bird for packing it to the ranch for me, though. It'll make a right peart pet for my gal, Penelope."

Sam's countenance fell. Seeing which, the judge rolled over on his mattress with a shout of laughter, and emphasized his merriment with a loud slap upon

his boot with his heavy riding quirt. Then he caught the disconsolate Yaller-bird in his arms.

"Why, ye little yaller rascal," said he. "What are ye whimperin' for? Do ye reckon I want yer old antelope? What do ye allow I'd do with it—all tied up in a lamb's skin, too? Why, look a-here, Magee; see what this yer yaller high-flyer hez been doin' to this yer fawn. 'Pears as ef he was tryin' to adopt it!"

Thus ridiculed, the boy proceeded to unfold his elaborate plan. It seemed to afford the judge unlimited amusement. But his father nodded approvingly.

"Wal, Sammy," said he, "ye'll make a right smart sheep-man yet, I reckon. Stick to yer little game, son, an' I 'low ye'll fetch ole Granny, sure."

Then he lay back upon his mattress, blew out a fragrant cloud of smoke, and apparently forgot Sam and his pet entirely, in a conversation with the judge about a disputed land title.

Left to himself, the boy repaired with his pets to his own room. It was a bright little place. Through the open window the level rays of the declining sun flashed upon the wings of bluejays and redbirds and woodpeckers that lit up the interior with quaint color like an odd fresco. A small pair of antlers emblazoned the wall at the head of a low cot bed. On the door, which Sam opened, a magnificent badger-skin was extended with the claws on. Sam set down the antelope in a corner.

It was not his first pet. This was the fifth in the

direct line. He had hitherto squandered his early affections on a small prairie-dog and a lean opossum. But the prairie-dog was very savage, and the opossum was given to "playing dead," and altogether they little repaid him for his trouble. They quarrelled continually, but made very little progress, for the opossum brought every combat to an abrupt termination by curling up in a round ball and shamming an untimely decease. At last, one night, the prairie-dog gnawed out of his box, and the opossum cheerfully followed suit. The box was empty in the morning. For a while Yaller-bird pined in secret, but redoubled his efforts to discover something new. One morning he appeared, as he said, with "a very pretty young wild-cat." It was small, black and white, with a little pointed head, bright, bead-like eyes, and a long, bushy tail. He called his father into his room to see it. Magee gave one look, gasped violently, picked it up quickly, and hurled it through the open window, at the same time calling loudly for "Concho," the shepherd dog. *Sam's wild-cat was a baby skunk.* From that time forward Yaller-bird had languished for pets.

He went up to a little box that stood by the window and turned out its contents upon the floor. It was Yaller-bird's cabinet of curiosities, and contained a motley array of souvenirs. He turned the various articles over tenderly—a frontier boy's meager playthings: a silver spur; a broken six-shooter; several flint arrow-heads; a rawhide whip-lash; a small prairie-dog's skull, the teeth of which could be drawn from the jaw in the form of a bow, and afterwards replaced

in their sockets ; a few birds' eggs, somewhat crippled by their less fragile neighbors ; a snake's skin ; the ears of a jackass rabbit, cut off and dried ; an eagle's claw ; an antelope horn ; two or three cartridges ; and a small dog-collar. This last was what Sam was after ; he seized it eagerly. It was of the chain variety—locking on with a key, and had been given to Yaller-bird by an Eastern traveller who had stopped one night at the ranch.

He hastened to clasp it on the neck of the already heavily adorned fawn. Having secured it, he surveyed the effect admiringly. Sam could not read, so his eyes were spared the glaring falsehood which the collar declared. It read : "WOLF ;" *Licensed Dog.* No. 2563.

I have said Sam could not read. But he had a unique method of indicating his own property. From his acquaintance with the trade-marks of cattle-men and cowboys in the neighborhood, he had invented a kind of rude heraldry. Indeed, at one time, a sheepherder of his father's, taking an interest in the unlettered lad, had endeavored to initiate him in the mysteries of the alphabet. Sam was quite cheerful at this prospect of education. He watched his preceptor demurely ; inquired "whar on airth he caught onto all them cow-brands ;" and when requested to copy them, did so with a laborious and painstaking zeal—handling his pen as if it were a jack-knife or a branding-iron, and leaving behind him a bedaubed record of hieroglyphics that were as erratic as they were indelible. But his "interest in his task ceased

with each lesson, and the alphabet remained a pleasing and recurring novelty." Then Sam took to the easier language of symbols, and adopted his own sign-manual—a rude outline picture of a bird.

When this was seen upon an article, it was a delicate hint that it was Yaller-bird's. In the delight with which his "brand" inspired him, he recorded it upon everything he possessed—his boots, his hat, his canteen, his crook—his entire outfit. He even went so far as to burn a very large and elaborate copy of this design with a red-hot iron upon the door of his room, but here his father interfered and he desisted. Sam was not sure that he had not better brand the antelope. Its glittering white side was a tempting surface for his label. But while he would not have hesitated a second in the case of a colt or calf that belonged to him, he was averse to giving his little pet so much pain.

A shrill sound, like a sharp whistle, startled Sam as he was putting up his treasures. A red-shafted flicker that had been beating a tattoo upon the nearest pecan was looking in at his window. Perhaps he recognized the wings of a former comrade displayed upon the opposite wall. As Sam rose hurriedly to his feet, a small red lizard, speckled all over with polka dots of black, that had been regarding him with glittering eyes, disappeared over the window-ledge. Sam recognized his fourth pet.


The sun was setting. A faint pink glow painted out the gray all around the horizon. Catching up the antelope, Sam ran down the ladder, and untying Gran-

ny, placed them both in a box-stall for the night. Then he went in to supper.

In three days Granny had adopted her new charge as her own. Yaller-bird joyfully cut the fastenings of the lambskin, and the young fawn sprang out gladly into the sunshine, as if bursting from some grim and ugly chrysalis. It had grown strong and nimble now, and trotted gayly by the side of its new mother. But it never joined in the romps and gambols of the lambs. It was too stately and graceful for that. Every day it accompanied Yaller-bird in his wanderings with the herd. He grew very fond of it. More than once he was obliged to let out the chain-collar as its throat expanded. At last he lost the key. He was glad that he had reached the last link, for the collar was fastened now for life.

III

SUMMER—hot, dry, breathless—visited in dusty robes the brown prairie. Each day the sun rose—a ball of fire, and drove a flaming chariot through the staring sky. By night the faint odors of hill and hollow swooned beneath a lurid moon. The creaking wagons in the travelled trails left far in their wake a grimy cloud that powdered the wan landscape with the ashes of age. A few gleaming stones and cracking mud flats marked the smaller watercourses. Where the prairie-dogs dove in their burrows lingered little puffs



of smoky dust, as though the withered earth were firing a feeble volley from hidden rifle-pits. But on the wings of the hot winds and over the gray divides came a more palpable smoke that dimmed the sight and smarted the eyes, and at evening hung a fiery banner in the heavens that blotted out the stars. Meanwhile the little fawn had grown a quaint figure by the side of its strange mother. Already its delicate head looked easily over her broad back, and its light, elastic step outstripped the tardy gait of the humble ewe. Granny often looked puzzled at her nimble offspring. Sam wondered what she was thinking about. Little by little the fawn's outlines changed. Its coat grew rough and longer. Under Sam's soft caress he could hardly believe its hair was not a fine mass of crinkled quills. Its flexible ears became longer and more pointed; its star-like eyes even more deep and tender; and then one day two jet-black horns sprouted upon its pretty forehead. Beguiled by the tender grasses and delicate flowers in the valleys, it often strayed from the side of the ewe. Granny missed it at first, then grew indifferent, then rejected it altogether. The change was complete. The fawn had become a full-grown antelope.

It was a hot afternoon, and Sam was lying on a parched hill-side. His flock was stretched out beneath him, with the antelope grazing on its border. Afar came the shrill barks of the marmots, which were unusually vociferous that day, as if angry on account of the increasing heat. He had been watching a gathering flock of buzzards that seemed to come soaring

from everywhere out of the blank blue sky, dropping to earth in the vicinity of a dead steer that lay beneath a live-oak, or sitting grimly and with gleaming red crests in the tops of adjacent trees. The sunlight was pitiless, glaring, intense. It sought Sam out so persistently upon the hill-side that he began to yearn for the quiet pecans yonder, and their peaceful twilight shade. How heavy the air was! It seemed to Sam that Concho would dislocate his jaw in panting. A few puffs of smoke drifted past the hill. Sam sat up and blinked his hot eyelids. As he did so a whirring bevy of quail flew quickly by him; then a jack-rabbit—its long ears laid back, its eyes staring with terror—darted swiftly past. The prairie-dogs had become suddenly quiet. What could it all mean?

Suddenly Sam sprang to his feet with his eyes fixed on a distant divide where an ominous black cloud drifted. What was that flashing below it, here and there pricking the dark curtain above with red and gold? Fire!

It flashed over Sam in an instant. The next his sheep stampeded, running from every quarter into a round, tumbling clump. There was the sound of hurrying feet, and a herd of agile, dainty forms, on whose white sides the sunlight flashed like silver, dashed through the startled mass, scattering them far and wide over the prairie. Antelope. They coursed away to the left. Something was following them at some distance, trailing a long tether behind it. Alas! in vain Sam called; in vain Sam shouted; in vain Sam shook his crook in mingled rage and grief. The

fawn, in one long stare of recognition, had beheld its rightful comrades and started in pursuit.

Sick at heart, Sam turned to rally his scattering flock. There was not an instant to be lost! A swift, icy wind was sweeping down from the north, waving the dry tops of the prairie grass, and bringing the line of flame directly towards him. Sam recognized the fearful "norther," and understood now the former strange hush of the early afternoon. He could see the fiery blossoms of the conflagration, waving to and fro, and swaying in flaming fronds. The great pecan grove—a safe haven—was far distant, visible upon the opposite horizon in a dim, pale-green line.

He called to Concho. "Throw 'em in!" he shouted, using the term by which shepherd dogs are trained to gather a flock. The faithful animal obeyed. Excitedly urging his sheep before him with the assistance of Concho, Sam started in the direction of the ranch.

But it was slow and painful work. The lambs, "knowing nothing, fearing nothing," were wild with fun, and, frisking in playful troops about the borders of the herd, distracted the anxious ewes. Now and then a bleating mother would stop altogether, and, lamenting her lost offspring, plunge madly back in the face of the coming scourge. Sam was in despair.


And now other denizens of the prairies, fleeing the fiery death, began to pass him. A troop of wild mustangs swept by; a pack of gray, skulking wolves, with panting jaws and frightened eyes, leaving the sheep—their favorite prey—unheeded in their terrified flight; hares, roused from their forms, and meadow-larks, gay

in their yellow breastplates—all breathless with dread of the common enemy. The smoke grew denser. Sam gave a startled look back. He shrieked with terror. The fire was close behind him, moving and tossing like a flaming sea.

Then it was that Sam began to pray. He was not a very pious boy. I am afraid—living, as he did, “far out upon the prairie”—he was guilty of the other shortcomings of the familiar hymn, and “never read the Bible, nor heard the Sabbath bell.” But I doubt if more civilized urchins ever did as much sincere praying in a short space of time as Sam did. He made himself responsible for future days of such guileless innocence and unadulterated purity as would have entitled him to be enrolled among juvenile saints.

But all the while the fire kept creeping nearer and nearer, and all the while the panic-stricken sheep kept scattering far and wide, until finally becoming completely demoralized they stampeded in every direction. Sam gave up at last. He loved his sheep; he loved his pretty lambs; but the love of life was far stronger.

Just when, desperate with grief and fear, he halted to catch a second's breath before dashing on again, he heard a pitiful bleat close by. He cast a hurried look around. Pale as he was with haste and terror, Sam could not repress a cry of joy as he beheld his lost antelope, caught by his trailing *riata* about the trunk of a thorny mesquite, and hopelessly left to perish. He dashed to the tree, and with a blow of his jack-knife severed the cord. His released pet, as if in gratitude, ran joyfully to his side.



A sudden thought struck the breathless Sam. Amid the smoke and glare of the oncoming fire he turned and beheld it as, impelled by the norther's blast, it leaped ahead in giant jumps, and caught at the dry prairie as if eager to embrace him.

Some of the frantic sheep were already surrounded by the flames, and miserably perishing. Sam hesitated but an instant. Then severing the trailing cord close by the chain-collar, he sprang at one bound upon the back of the antelope. He twined his fingers firmly in the flexible links, and dug his bare feet into the animal's rough sides. At the same instant Concho, in surprise at his rashness, began to bark violently, and the antelope shied and was off like a shot.

Away they flew! Poor, panting Concho, struggling vainly, bent his lithe body nearly double in his frantic leaps, but he was no match for the arrowy courser that his master bestrode. Sam dared not sit erect; he dared not look back; he hardly dared breathe, so swift and headlong was his career. He bent his body close down to the antelope's neck, gripped him hard, and held on for dear life.

There are few things a Texan boy cannot ride, from a circus trick-mule to a "bucking broncho," but before the antelope had taken a dozen springs Sam saw that he had met his match, and knew he was in for it. His head swam, his eyes started from their sockets, with the intensity of his efforts to save himself from falling; and the brown prairie, spurned beneath the flying feet of his pet, reeled before his fainting vision. What a mad ride that was! Poor

Concho, far behind, uttered a few despairing yelps that came faintly to his ear, and made him pity him even in his own extreme peril. But Sam held on—held on grimly, like an avenging fate upon the back of the terrified fawn; held on despairingly, as a drowning man clings; held on, in spite of the norther's icy blasts, which, outstripping the fierce breath of the fire, froze his poor fingers until he might lose the power to grasp; held on, through gusts of black smoke, driven by the wind, that smarted his eyes and blinded him, and at times wrapped him round and round in a stifling ebon shroud. Twice the antelope stumbled and Sam's heart was in his mouth. Once, when the animal gave a sudden spring to avoid a hidden marmot burrow, he was almost thrown, and only saved himself by a supreme effort. He was nearly fainting now, and felt that his senses were leaving him. He knew that he could hold out, at that killing pace, but a few moments longer.

All at once the antelope stopped short. They were in the dry bed of an *arroyo*. Across the barren, rocky bed of the spent watercourse Sam knew the fire could never reach him. He gasped once with a joy that was almost agony. The next moment, with the sound of rushing water in his ears, all things grew black before him, the horizon whirled around, and he slipped from the back of the antelope, senseless to the ground.

When Sam came to himself again it was with a sensation of being unpleasantly moist and sticky. His throat was parched and burning. Something was

fawning upon him with uncouth caresses, licking his face and hands, and whimpering with anxiety. It was his faithful Concho. The antelope stood at a safe distance shyly regarding him.

At the same moment he heard a rough but kindly and familiar voice say :

"Wal, my leetle son, I reckon ye jest had ter hump yerself, didn't yer? I seen yer skurryin' round like a hog goin' to war, an' the fire a-comin', so I saddled Oscar and went for ye. But, Lord love ye! ye hedn't no use for me. Ye jest went by me like a rifle bullet. Thet thar critter pet o' yourn are spryer than chain-lightnin'—*greased*. Don't gag, son. Thet are nuthin' but some whiskey I bought down ter Brady fer snake-bite, an' poured down ye, to bring ye round quicker when ye was took thar. Thet's all. I reckon them sheep's gone to a hot country, though. Not a hide nor a horn left. Thet's five hundred dollars gone at a lick an' dead oodles of lambs—every one worth a five-dollar bill. Hows'mever, I ain't goin' to worry, son, about the plaguy sheep. I reckon I'm pretty lucky to get back my own little Yaller-bird."



**YALLER-BIRD'S CHRISTMAS
TURKEY**

YALLER-BIRD'S CHRISTMAS TURKEY

I

It was Christmas Eve on the lonely prairie. The dull, monotonous, weary day of a Texan shepherd had drawn to its uneventful close. A pale-faced moon, riding high above the pecan motte where the solitary had pitched his camp, looked compassionately down upon the details of his humble house-keeping. A small tent glimmered ghost-like among the trees. Within a corral, roughly made of dead sticks and dry brush, the woolly flock were securely penned. Their sleepy cries and querulous bleatings filled the neighboring solitudes. The flickering light of the camp-fire flashed upon their myriad eyes with a weird, spectral effect. They were like so many dancing will-o'-the-wisps surrounding the stooping figure of their herder, and gleamed and coruscated about him with a movement wild and uncanny. But their familiar presence had no terrors for *him*. Of far more significance was the odor of frying bacon and boiling coffee. The solitary was cooking his supper.

It was indeed a small individual who accepted these

pastoral responsibilities. The figure at which the curious sheep were so intently staring was that of a boy of scarcely eleven years. Straight black hair fell in long tangles below his heavy sombrero, framing a freckled face that was deeply tanned from sun and exposure. The big brown eyes had an elfish look in the red light of the fire. This was heightened by the absurdity of his frontier costume. A long yellow "slicker," originally designed for a man of ambitious proportions, completely enveloped his diminutive body and trailed for some feet on the ground behind him. His small hands with difficulty asserted themselves beyond the long sleeves, which had been rolled and turned back indefinitely. The high boots which protruded beneath this monotonous garment were evidently not mates, and so large that they were a serious inconvenience to their wearer. Had it not been for the cheerful boyish face that overlooked and obviously triumphed over these difficulties of dress, the incongruous figure might have been taken for a demoralized scarecrow rather than a sober shepherd.

The sketchy repast that is dignified on the frontier by the name of supper was soon completed. A few strips of scorched bacon, a slice or two of dry bread, a plateful of watery beans, with a cup of clear coffee, and the hungry wanderer rose refreshed. But not until he had supplied another party with the remnants of his humble banquet. This party had awaited the conclusion of the meal with an intent gaze and a hair-trigger smile that was as pathetic as it was dog-like. He was known as "Doctor," and was the sole

companion of his master's wanderings. Doctor was not a shepherd dog. Being a vigorous bull-terrier of the brindled variety, he could not claim for his diminutive but muscular anatomy the slightest predilection for his calling. He had taken it up as a matter of necessity, not of choice. But he was intelligent, observant, and persevering. If he did not understand sheep, it was not because he had not tried faithfully. He had given close attention to the idiosyncrasies of that inoffensive but exasperating animal. If, in common with mankind, he had been often unable to lead them in the paths they should follow, it was not from failure to use all the powers of persuasion which his jimmer-jaws and shrill bark could bring to bear upon a perplexing subject. And that he brought to each emergency an energy and courage that quite put Yaller-bird to the blush was, perhaps, not the least of the many qualities which endeared him to his master.

His meager supper over, the owner of this singular title repaired to his tent, accompanied by his gambolling dog. Here he lighted a storm lantern, suspended from the ridge-pole of his canvas abode, which at once illuminated its narrow confines, and gave it from without the appearance of a large transparency, on which the movements of the boy and dog within were sketched with magnified and grotesque effect. Then he gravely divested himself of the long yellow garment which had inspired his curious christening, and inspected it with solicitude before hanging it up for the night. The tail of the "slicker" had accumulated a phenomenal amount of real estate in the weary pil-

grimaces of previous days. But with this matter the youthful shepherd was not concerned. A new development in the shape of a rent extending from the waist half way up one shoulder arrested his attention. At this discovery Yaller-bird heaved a deep sigh.


"I reckon it won't last, Doc, for the rest of the winter, and it's all I've got," he said, exhibiting it ruefully to the attentive canine. Doctor said nothing, but at once devoted himself to the task of drawing off his master's boots, an operation for which, being a bull pup, he had a special regard, inasmuch as it exercised his peculiar tenacity of jaw. To this task he was accustomed each evening to devote his energies. These boots being large, as I have already indicated, the dog readily accomplished this, although he wrecked himself against the tent-pole in a final effort, whereupon Yaller-bird tied them together with a bit of string, and gravely suspended them alongside the lantern, where they swung heavily like some erratic pendulum.

"I reckon, Doc, you don't savey just why I'm doin' thet," remarked Yaller-bird, stepping back and surveying his work with hands shoved deeply into the pockets of ducking trousers that were supported by a single suspender; "but ter-night is Krissmus Eve, and I'm a-layin' fur a fellow named *Sandy Claws*, who gen'rally comes along and shoves candies and presents inter people's stockings. Bein' ez I ain't got none"—the speaker here inspected his bare and thorn-scratched feet—"I reckoned I'd hang up my boots, fur they're roomy and accommodatin'. P'r'aps,

ef *Sandy* comes along our way, he might jest natchally heave somethin' inter 'em."

Doctor, preserving a respectful silence at this communication, but with attent ears and head on one side, apparently being deeply interested, Yaller-bird continued: "It 'd take me too long to tell you jest now how the custom came about, Doc, and I reckon, arter all, you wouldn't quite understand it, but it was all along of a Great King who was born among some sheep, just like this, in a furren kentry, and three wise fellers kem plumb across the purrara on camels, a-bringin' toys and presents to give to Him. A feller from San Antone give me the tip, and he read all about it in a book called *Ben Thar*, which was wrote by a soger chap, and I reckon he knew all about it from the name he give his book. Anyhow, that's where I got hold of it. And, ever sence, presents has been pretty thick in certain places about this time o' year, and this yer *Sandy Claws* is said to be the cause of it. I ain't never seen him, and I reckon he comes when fellers like you and me is asleep, but I reckon I'd know him ef I ever sot eyes on him; and I want you to be oncommon keerful ter-night, and not bark nor do nuthin' to surprise him, ef you should happen to see him kem inter this tent; fur ef yer should, we don't git nuthin'. And I know a dog ez won't git any breakfast ter-morrer mornin.' *Savey thet?*"

Doctor did not signify whether he "saveyed" or not, except to wag a stumpy tail violently, which was evidently regarded by his master as significant. Howbeit, without further conversation, Yaller-bird began



to prepare for bed. This consisted in shaking up an old straw mattress that lay in a corner of the tent, and divesting himself of his ducking trousers, which were rolled up and placed beneath his head to serve as a pillow. Having accomplished these preliminaries, the boy drew near the lantern with the intention of putting it out, and the intelligent Doctor began that circular movement with which dogs usually prepare to lie down. However, they were not destined to retire so early, for all at once the ears of both were assailed by an unaccustomed noise without, and the apparition of a human hand, endeavoring to open the tent-flap which had been tied down for the night, met the astonished eyes of master and dog.

It is probable that, under ordinary circumstances, Yaller-bird would have hastened at once to assist the stranger who so abruptly attempted to intrude upon his privacy, but there was something in the appearance of the hand now clutching the tent-string which, in view of his recent reflections, made him hesitate. It was a large hand, and covered from wrist to finger with an unusual growth of long and tawny-colored hair. Now, Yaller-bird's conception of the mysterious personage he expected that evening was by no means definite, and it flashed over him in an instant that this peculiar member must appertain to that *Sandy Claws*, in regard to whom he entertained such a keen curiosity. Himself the possessor of a suggestive nickname, he was, for the moment, quite thrilled with the appropriateness of the other's title. So he quieted the alert Doctor, who had improvised a very respectable

growl at the intrusion, and covering himself up to his chin with the bedclothes, remained very still until the personage without had effected an entrance. When this was accomplished, he was rewarded by the sight of a short, stout figure, clad in brown ducking garments, and possessed of a fiery red beard which entirely hid the lower portion of his face from a point a little below the eyes. The figure removed a short pipe from his mouth, and, after staring in a surprised way at the recumbent Yaller-bird, sat down upon a vinegar-keg, expelling a cloud of smoke into the tent.

"Merry Christmas!" he ejaculated, in a gruff voice.

Beyond a doubt, Yaller-bird reflected, this was the *Sandy Claws* of his dreams. It did not strike him as especially strange that the remarkable personage should look and smoke like other folks. He at once sat up and addressed his visitor.

"Merry Krissmuss!" he replied. "I didn't expect you so early."

The man laughed and said he had a long way to come. Yaller-bird thought this extremely probable.

"You've camped out fur the night, I see," the man remarked, nodding in the direction of the bed.

"I went to bed earlier than usual, allowin' to be in bed when you got here," Yaller-bird responded.

The man stared at this, but smoked quietly and said nothing. After a pause, so long protracted that it became painful, during which the youthful shepherd scrutinized his visitor narrowly in the hope of detecting some hidden present, he thought he would offer a vague hint to his silent guest.

"Thar's my boots !" he remarked, significantly, pointing to the suspended articles.

"I reckon they're big enough," said the stranger, surveying them with evident interest.

"Did you bring me anythin' to put inter 'em fur Krissmuss?" the little fellow inquired, his big brown eyes dancing eagerly in his excitement.

"Wal, no," the man replied, "onless you'll have this plug of terbacker." As he spoke, he drew from his pocket a long slab of that article known as "natural leaf." Then perceiving by the look in Yaller-bird's face that the disappointment he had inflicted was keen, he laughed somewhat embarrassedly and said :

"I allow I might hev thought of it, bein' ez I've jest kem from town and left the boys all drinkin' egg-nog on account of the season ; but ye see I wasn't noways certain I'd fall in with you, and I had a long ways to go."

There was a brief silence, during which the stranger evidently considered the situation.

"Arter all," he said, finally, his features lighting up with a humorous gleam, "it ain't fashionable no longer to be a-givin' presents. The hull thing is busted and gone out of date."

Somewhat consoled by this piece of information, Yaller-bird inquired what the people nowadays generally did.

"The keerect thing jest now," said his visitor, with the air of an oracle, is an A1 Christmas turkey, and I know where one is a-roostin' jest at present, and don't you forgit it."

At this intelligence Yaller-bird unrolled and assumed his ducking trousers, whipped out his jack-knife and cut down his monstrous boots, and in a few minutes stood before his visitor fully equipped and caparisoned.

"Ef you're of a mind to go out with me on a hunt fur him," said he of the red beard, "I reckon I'm with you. I left my gun jest outside. I'd hev brought this turkey along, but I wasn't sure I'd fall in with you, and I didn't care to tote twenty-five pounds of meat just for the fun of the thing. He's a big feller, and I allow it ain't quite reg'lar to let him get off so easy."

Yaller-bird, whose awe of the mysterious *Sandy Claws* had entirely vanished upon learning that he had forgotten the customary presents, immediately signified his readiness. Accordingly, the strangely assorted couple and the alert Doctor set out at once.

It was a clear night, and the rays of the moon made surrounding objects dimly visible. After a short tramp through the brush, Yaller-bird's guide halted beneath a big tree, and, leaning his back against it, addressed him in a whisper :

"The turkey we're arter is jest over yonder a-roost-in' in a dead pecan. Yer smaller and spryer than I be, and might take a peek and tell me ef he's thar yet ; but go slow and easy."

Yaller-bird stole forward at once, and, peering through the branches, he beheld a great bird perched in the top of a neighboring tree. It was plainly visible in the moonlight—its head beneath its wing. He retreated quietly.

"It's all right, *Sandy*; he's *thar*!" he said, breathlessly.

The man eyed him indignantly, and, bringing his gun to a rest, leaned on it and hissed these words in his ear:

"Ef you're goin' shootin' with me, I'll hev you to onderstand that ye can't be too peart with me on short notice, young feller!"

Yaller-bird was quite abashed and nonplussed at this address, but imagined that the stranger must be very sensitive about the color of his beard. He apologized humbly.

Appeased at this, his companion motioned to him, and they crept onward with bated breath. At length, within easy shooting distance, the man halted.

"Now," he whispered, hoarsely, "ye'll see me jest everlastin'ly lamb-baste thet gobbler!"

He cocked the gun. The sharp click made the bird start, and it was seen to lift its head from its wing. The next instant a stream of fire poured from the long barrel, lighting up the stranger's features with a wild, unearthly light, and amid the smoke and thunder of the discharge, Yaller-bird distinctly heard something fall among the brush with a heavy thud.

"I told ye so; I jest natchally warmed his jacket!" shouted the man, exultingly. "Now stay *thar* and I'll snake him out." He dashed off into the chaparral.

Fearful of again offending his singular acquaintance, poor Yaller-bird remained glued to the spot, clutching the muscular Doctor, who had behaved beautifully up to the present time, but was now making frantic efforts

to be in at the death. Yaller-bird stood his ground faithfully, although he had grave misgivings that everything was not right in the brush. He heard first a blow, then a cry of surprise, followed by a fluttering, and then more blows in quick succession, mingled with unearthly screams and, it must be confessed, some very shocking language. During a combat which, from the noise and confusion that reached him, must have been more like a cyclone than anything else, Yaller-bird came to the conclusion that the mysterious personage, *Sandy Claws* was a gentleman of very bad morals.

The struggle in the chaparral suddenly ceased, and all was quiet for a few moments. Then a faint voice, pregnant with agony, came to Yaller-bird's ear.

"Come out here, for God's sake! Are you dead or drunk out thar? This bald-headed rooster hez got me! He's got me! and he's jest natchally killin' me; thet's what he's doin'—"

Yaller-bird waited to hear no more. He let Doctor slip, and plunged into the brush.

Arrived at the scene of hostilities, his eyes met a singular sight. The grass and bushes in the vicinity of the struggle were trodden flat, and prostrate in the centre of this area, where he had fallen, lay his red-bearded friend, with a bald eagle clutching the seat of his ducking trousers, and with outspread wings asserting the supremacy of our great and glorious republic.

The fierce and powerful creature evidently had his enemy at a very painful disadvantage from the groans he was uttering. Yaller-bird quickly caught up a dead

stick, and dealt the preoccupied bird a blow upon the head that made him relax his talons. But, quick as he was, he anticipated the valiant Doctor by a second only. Then ensued one of the most remarkable battles that was ever put upon record. For, in his crippled condition, the eagle was hardly a match for the bulldog. Jaws snapped, talons struck, and feathers flew; and, when it was over, the brave bird was minus its tail, and the trim and natty Doctor was spotted with his own blood and that of his adversary.

During the combat the discomfited man rose from the ground and, like Yaller-bird, remained an absorbed spectator. When at length the bird of freedom succumbed to the teeth of the Doctor, and, turning upon its back, yielded up the ghost with a last gasp, he delivered himself as follows :

"Lie thar, ye dad-gasted idgit ! I reckon yer goose is cooked. Ef I hadn't stumbled, and made a mistake, and picked ye up fur a gobbler, ye wouldn't a-got me in sich a fix."

"Ez it is," he said, ruefully, turning to his youthful companion, "it'll take right smart of darnin' to mend them pants, and I reckon there ain't mutton taller and linnymment enough at the camp to ever set me to rights."

Yaller-bird, touched by his mishap, attempted consolation.

"I'm sure I'm very sorry, *Mr. Claros*," he said, "thet thet thar eagle got into you so bad, but I've got some magic oil in my tent thet'll take the pizen out."

He was surprised by the instant change in the manner of his companion.

"Look a-here, Skeesicks, I reckon I told you to drop them nicknames o' yourn," he said, savagely.

"Why, isn't your name *Sandy Claws*?" inquired Yaller-bird, in surprise.

His red-bearded friend burst abruptly into a loud laugh.

"Santa Claus!" he said. "Wal, now, thet's good! *Santa Claus*! Not muchly, Bub. My name's Rube Skinner, and, barrin' sich bald-headed varmints ez thet, ther a'n't no better turkey shot atween Texas and Kintuck!"

THE END

MERCANTILE LIBRARY,
— * —
NEW YORK



15
15







